



Date Dec 1919







THROUGH THE ENEMY'S LINES

HERBERT STRANG

"The best living writer for Boys."

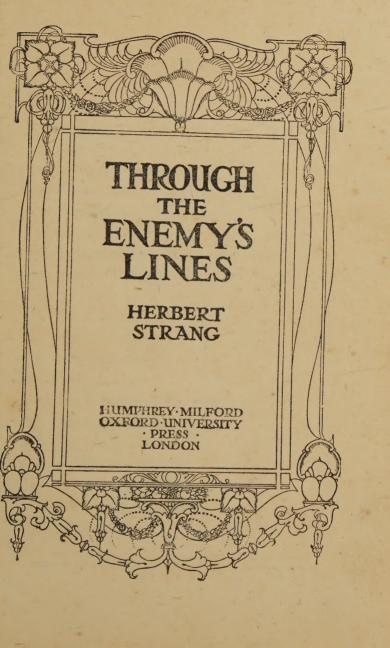
Complete List of Stories in Alphabetical Order.

ADVENTURES OF DICK TREVANION, THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY ROCHESTER, THE A GENTLEMAN AT ARMS A HERO OF LIEGE AIR PATROL, THE AIR SCOUT, THE BARCLAY OF THE GUIDES BOYS OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE BROWN OF MOUKDEN BURTON OF THE FLYING CORPS CARRY ON CRUISE OF THE GYRO-CAR, THE FIGHTING WITH FRENCH FLYING BOAT, THE FRANK FORESTER HUMPHREY BOLD JACK HARDY KING OF THE AIR KOBO LORD OF THE SEAS MOTOR SCOUT, THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN, THE ONE OF CLIVE'S HEROES PALM TREE ISLAND ROB THE RANGER ROUND THE WORLD IN SEVEN DAYS SETTLERS AND SCOUTS SULTAN JIM SWIFT AND SURE TOM BURNABY THROUGH THE ENEMY'S LINES WITH DRAKE ON THE SPANISH MAIN WITH HAIG ON THE SOMME





SCHECHIER PASHA DISMOUNTS.



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CONTENTS

CHAP.					PAGE
	PRELIMINARY	•	,	•	9
I	THE WANDERING DERVISH	•	-		15
II	THE BARBER OF BAGDAD		2	٠	27
III	HIDE AND SEEK	÷	·	•	44
IV	A HIGH DIVE			•	54
v	THE KELAK	•			69
· VI	IN THE DESERT	•	•		83
VII	OUTWITTING THE TURK .		٠		97
VIII	SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNT	rs	٠	•	111
IX	THE CAVE IN THE HILLS		•		123
x	AN ARABIAN TALE			•	135
XI	THE AMBUSH		•	•	151
XII	SCUDDY SMITH	•	•	•	164
XIII	THE DIZ	•	•		179
XIV	THE CAPTURE OF THE GUNS			9	195
xv	SHORT COMMONS	•	•	•	208
XVI	THE ROPE'S END				222
IIV	AT THE RISING OF THE MOOR	N		•	233
VIII	THE PRICE OF A TALE .				245
XIX	THE BATTLE FOR THE DIZ				256
	conclusion				278



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

COLOUR FRONTISPIECE

SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNTS (see page 120)

DRAWING	S IN	LINE			PAGM
"I TAKE THIS HORSE," H					
INTO THE RIVER .					67
COLLAPSE				•	81
THE NIGHT-RIDERS .			•		109
AMAZEMENT OF TWO KURI	os .		•	•	149
A SURPRISE FOR SCUDDY	SMITH		•		169
THE DASH FOR THE GUNS	•	٠	•		199
"MASHALLAH!" .			•	•	229
AT THE OUTPOST				•	251
THE SENTRIES SILENCED .					265



PRELIMINARY

ROGER BURNET would never have gone through the adventures related in the following pages but for a certain cablegram that he received on June 13, 1914. No one who knows Roger can doubt that by this time he would have had adventures enough; as he wrote to his aunt: "Our old country has a big war only once in a hundred years. Can you imagine a fellow being out of it?" But his manner of entrance into it would not have been what it actually was if the School porter had not handed to him, on that fateful day, the well-known envelope of the Commercial Cable Company.

The moment was, in a sense, unfortunate. The final House Match had not been played, and the match of the year was still a month distant. As Burnet was the best bowler in his House, and first change in the Eleven, there was dismay when it became known that he would not be able to play. A good many vigorous expletives were flung at

A 2

Burnet senior; but as that gentleman was far away, to abuse him was obviously only

disturbing the air.

Roger Burnet's father, the sender of the cablegram, had always been something of a mystery to the boys. They knew that he had lived for years somewhere in the East; they liked to hear Roger, in his rare expansive moments, reel off a string of Arabic or Persian; but they could never make out to their complete satisfaction what Burnet's pater was doing. "He's an archæologist, I tell you," Burnet would reply to a question. "Yes, but what does he do?" his questioner would say, and the probable answer, "Why, digs: what's it matter?" was not very illuminating. A gardener digs, but he does not call his work archæology.

The cablegram said simply: "Come at once." Roger took it to his House master, who sent him on to the Head. "This is very irregular, Burnet," remarked that potentate, dangling his eye-glasses. "I am accustomed to be informed of the reason for desiring to withdraw a boy from school in mid-term. You have no idea of your father's reason, I presume?" Roger confessed that he had not. "I am inclined to telegraph for an explanation," the master continued.

Roger hinted that that would be expensive. "Of course it would be put down in your bill," answered the Head. Thereupon Roger decided that it must not be done. He explained that it would take too long; the message had already been more than a week on the way; it must have been conveyed first to Bagdad, and then telegraphed from there; and if his father should be ill, he might even now reach his side too late. On this the Head became human. "We'll hope it's not that, my boy," he said. "On the whole I think you had better go. A letter of explanation may be in the post. You will of course return next term; your trial scholarship examination is to be at Christmas, remember."

And Roger packed up and left school that day, for ever.

The fact was, Mr. Burnet was ill. He had had a heat-stroke, and was at this moment lying exhausted, longing with the fretfulness of an invalid for the arrival of his only son.

Twelve years before this, in 1902, he had given up his Cambridge fellowship, and, being a man of means, had resolved to devote himself to archæological research. Accompanied by his wife and child, he travelled to Mesopotamia, and had never returned to his

native land. His wife died there; he kept the boy with him, giving him instruction, somewhat irregularly, and encouraging him to pick up the native languages by the best of all possible methods, intercourse with the

people.

But Mr. Burnet was more than an archæologist. His discoveries among the ruined cities had set him dreaming. These river valleys had once been the seat of a prosperous civilization: why not revive their ancient splendours? All that was needed, it seemed, was to re-establish the system of irrigation upon which the earlier prosperity had been founded. The work was beyond him; his training had been in dead languages and vanished architectures. But Roger belonged to the new age: let him become an engineer and in due time realize the father's visions. Fortunately Roger had a bent for mathematics and science, and his masters expected him to win a good scholarship at Cambridge and attain to high honours in the Mechanical Sciences Tripos. He was rather interested in the career marked out for him.

Exploring an old aqueduct in the intense heat of the Mesopotamian summer, Mr. Burnet was struck down by apoplexy. He

partially recovered from the first shock, but was subject to a strange delusion. He fancied that Roger had completed his training, and was now ready to take up his life-work. Under that obsession he summoned him to the East. By the time he arrived the father's mind had regained its balance, and it was with distress that he learnt what he had done.

Roger found his father much changed. His illness, following on years of work in a trying climate, had broken down his hitherto strong physique. He arranged that Roger should return to England for the re-opening of school, but would not agree to accompany him, declaring that he still had work to do. As the weeks passed, it became clear to all but himself that his work was done. He grew steadily weaker; Roger could not leave him, and the outbreak of the Great War rendered it difficult, if not impossible, for an invalid in his condition to return home.

Months slipped by. In the hills on the borders of Turkey and Persia Mr. Burnet's life gradually ebbed away. The end came in the spring of 1916. Roger buried him in the soil he had loved so well—the desert which his fond dreams had seen blossoming as the rose. And then, crushing down his

grief, casting away his ambitions of scientific success, Roger bent himself to solve the practical problem that had worried him for more than a year: how to bear his part in the great struggle that was shaking the world.

CHAPTER I

THE WANDERING DERVISH

One afternoon in June 1916 a caravan, or kafila as it is termed in Mesopotamia, was travelling slowly along the road that led from the hill country on the borderland of Turkey and Persia, south-westward to Bagdad.

It was a very mixed company. There were merchants, Arab and Persian, mounted on camels, beside other camels laden with heavy bales. There were asses and mules bearing lighter merchandise. Among them marched a small group of pilgrims on foot. But the most noticeable feature of the caravan was a party of six horsemen, riding thoroughbreds, each having a similar horse or two in lead.

The times were troublous, and almost all the through traffic for which Bagdad serves as an emporium was suspended. But the Turkish army and the city itself needed supplies of all kinds. High prices ruled: Arabs and Persians alike, though they hate the Turks, are keen men of business. The merchants of our caravan were willing to take risks, which were many; for if they should get through the disturbed border country to their destination, they might then find the Turks fob them off with paper in exchange for goods. But sometimes the authorities paid in cash, and then the happy trader would go back a made man—unless perhaps he were stripped on the way by the Beni Lam or the Lurs. It was a gamble; but the Oriental is nothing if not a gambler.

The little party of horsemen, however, were not merchants. It might have been difficult to guess exactly what they were: the question had been a subject of gossip among the traders and pilgrims ever since they had joined the caravan. Five of them, men in the prime of life, from their appearance might have been members of one of the irregular levies in Turkish pay. They wore swords, and carried excellent and well-polished rifles slung at their backs. But the sixth was a mere youth, dressed like the rest in the usual loose tunic and leather riding breeches, but unarmed. He rode always side by side with the leader of the

party, a stalwart Arab of grave and serious aspect. The two were evidently great friends.

The explanation of the presence of these horsemen among the caravan was, as a matter of fact, quite simple. A certain Asker, chief of an offshoot of the Beni Lam tribe, whose stronghold was in the hills on the Persian side of the border, had been summoned by the Turkish authorities to assist in what they were pleased to call their holy war. Technically a Persian, he might have refused; but the Persian frontier line no longer counted; the Turks were overrunning the whole country, and Asker, with his handful of men, was powerless to oppose them. He thought it politic, then, to acquiesce in their demand, at the same time resolving to yield the barest minimum. Pleading the danger of attack by his old enemies the Lurs as a reason for not sending men, he sent horses instead, for which, since his tribe was poor, he asked that the Governor of Bagdad, or the Pasha in chief command of the army, would in his high condescension agree to pay the market price. It was these horses of Asker's that the party was conveying to the city.

The members of the party held themselves somewhat apart from the rest of the caravan,

not ostentatiously, but yet persistently. At the nightly halts they formed a little camp of their own; in the khans—the inns of the country—they kept together. The quality of their horses was the subject of admiration among their travelling companions; but some of the pilgrims threw them black looks, perhaps from envy, for it was a little galling to weary footfarers to see among them so many led horses with idle saddles.

On this afternoon, as they approached the spot, some three marches from Bagdad, where they would rest for the night, the stalwart Arab who led the party spoke confidentially in the ear of the youth by his side.

"Aga," said he in Arabic, "we must be on our guard to-night. My ears are sensitive as the wind-flower, and they caught scraps of talk among these misbegotten hajjis that bode mischief."

"You have scented mischief ever since we started, Yusuf," replied the youth with a smile. "I don't think we need to worry. We'll keep an eye on the horses, but then we always do that."

While he was speaking, some of the pilgrims, accompanied by other members of the caravan, came up to the party. One

of them, a haggard, unkempt, wild-eved old man, making himself spokesman for the rest, pointed a gnarled, black-nailed, claw-like finger at the youth whom Yusuf had addressed by the respectful title of Aga, and cried shrilly:

"Wallah! Billah! Is it right that true believers, making the pilgrimage, should be insulted by the presence of an infidel? Did we not see, yesterday at sunset, that he did not face the Tomb and pray with the rest?"

Without giving the youth time to reply, Yusuf burst forth:

"By the Beard, we must be patient indeed to let such foolishness pass the gateway of our ears. Does this plainsman, this treader of corn, even though he be a mullah, dare to insult a son of the mountains? When did the jackal learn to kick dirt at the lion? Away with thee, thou misshapen dog of a Persian, lest my anger rise and I tear thy froward tongue from thy throat."

The speaker looked so fierce, and was so menacingly backed up by his companions, that the Persians—a race not well endowed with the robuster kind of courage, but imbued with a profound respect for the prowess of the mountaineers-sheered off, sullen and unconvinced, but cowed. They

were in a majority, but had no stomach

for an affray with the Beni Lam.

Shortly afterwards a halt was called. The riders dismounted from their various beasts, and spread their carpets on the ground. The whole company, with the exception of the youth whom the old man had accused of being a Kafir or infidel, having performed the ablutions enjoined by their religion, knelt down, and, under the lead of one of the pilgrims, recited their prayers with much bowing and prostration. When their devotions were over, they prepared to resume their journey. During the few minutes' delay the old mullah passed from group to group; there was much whispering among them, and black looks were cast in the direction of the horsemen. It might have been noticed that Yusuf kept a keen watch on the old man; and when the kafila once more set forth, the horsemen rode more closely than before, and held their weapons in readiness for use.

Nothing happened, however, to give cause for alarm. Some of the men smoked waterpipes, which they lighted from the charcoal burning in iron pots attached to their saddles. Others sang couplets from Sadi and other Persian poets. The pilgrims repeated verses

from the Koran in a shrill monotonous drawl, bursting out every now and then into a cry of "Ya Allah!"

Some hours after dark they arrived at a khan, or wayside inn, where they proposed to pass the rest of the night. It was a long building of undressed stone, with a low doorway. Some of the members of the caravan spread their carpets on the bare ground outside. The more well-to-do entered the inn. Among these were five of the six horsemen, the sixth having been left in the adjoining stable to look after the animals. The youth sniffed as he went in. The atmosphere, indeed, was the reverse of pleasant. The one room that served as guest chamber was already somewhat crowded, and the entrance of the newcomers, carrying bridles, saddles, and saddle-bags, caused some confusion. The whole place was filled with suffocating smoke from the fire of camel-dung on the floor and there was no window or hole in the roof to let out the fumes. Two or three oil-lamps on shelves gave a little light, but added to the stench.

While the khanji or innkeeper was clearing a space for the new arrivals, and everything was noise and bustle, a man of particularly wild appearance came forward from a corner, and gradually edged his way through the crowd towards Yusuf. From the deerskin on his back, the great bunches of beads suspended from his broad leathern belt, and the calabash hanging from three chains that he held in one hand, it was evident that he was a dervish. Having at last come within arm's length of Yusuf, he addressed to him, in a deep-toned voice of peculiar quality, the customary salutation "Salam aleikam," to which the man replied with the invariable courtesy of the East. The dervish responded with a few words, inaudible to the rest of the company, but which caused the Arab to look at him keenly, and then to say, "Have you spread your carpet in a wet place?"

"Of a truth, my son, there has been much rain," answered the dervish, and then

returned to his corner.

There had been rain, indeed, in the early part of the day, so that none of the company who had perchance overheard the brief conversation would have felt any surprise; but Yusuf appeared to have derived a special satisfaction from the dervish's remark.

A little later, when things had settled down in the khan, and the khanji had brought his new guests their simple meal of unleavened bread, butter, sour milk, and dates, Yusuf, after a few words with his younger companion, approached the dervish, who had apparently nothing to eat, and invited him to join them.

"By my eyes," he said, "it is not right that a holy man should want while sinners

bask in plenty."

The dervish accepted the invitation, and went back with Yusuf to the corner in which he had disposed his party. He squatted on the floor, and having quaffed a bowl of milk. he said:

- "It is enough, friend. Abstinence is good for the soul."
- "True, O holy one! And whence do you come?"
 - "From Bagdad, the city of cities."
 - "And what is the news?"
- "There are some men that will still eat dirt."

"By the soul of my father, that is old news. But what of the holy war?"

"The Ingliz still lament by the waters of the Tigris; the Russian kafirs flee like hares before the Osmanli lions; the Germans have laid London in ashes, and have set chains about the neck of the Ingliz king."

"Allah il Allah!" cried Yusuf in a loud voice, drowning a sudden exclamation from the youth beside him, on whose arm he laid an arresting hand. "Hush, Aga!" he murmured: "there is a time to listen and a time to talk.—Go on, O holy one: tell us more of these marvellous happenings."

"The marvels are too many to relate, and they all happen beyond the seas! But there is other news of war at hand, of things we can see with our own eyes. A column of the Osmanli is assembled north-eastward of the city, with the intent, men say, to hurl themselves upon the Russians in Persia. Horsemen of that nation, called in their tongue Cossacks, have joined the Ingliz below Kut. Wallah! Has not the order come from the Padishah that the Russians shall no more be allowed to fall on the necks of the Ingliz in this way? But the soldiers of the Padishah need horses. Are not the Pashas sending hither and thither to lay hands on all the horses that may be found? And when they find them they seize upon them in the name of the Prophet (upon whom be blessing and peace!) and pay neither goods nor money."

"Wallahi!" exclaimed Yusuf. "That news is bitter as aloes. What shall I say to my master Asker if I return to him with

empty hands?"

"If you bring horses, friend, and wish to sell them in Bagdad, be advised, and approach not the city by this road. On my head be it if I speak not truth. Let but the eyes of the soldiers fall on your horses, and lo! they will be snatched from you, and only by the mercy of Allah will you yourselves escape from their hands. Mashallah! no good Moslem will stiffen his back against fighting the kafirs."

"That is true; yet the Germans, are they not also kafirs? It is told us that the soldiers of the Padishah are heel-roped to the Germans, and their own Pashas no longer have authority over them. Whose dogs are we that we should bow before

these pork-eating kafirs?"

"Bridle your tongue, friend," said the dervish. "The walls have ears, and there are tongues in the air. It would go ill with you if your hot breath were carried to those same kafirs. Touching your horses, let me give you a counsel. Go not into Bagdad by this road, but if peradventure you can enter the city by some other way, mayhap you will be able to sell instead of having them taken from you."

"Where then can we enter most safely?"

"At the south-east gate, nigh whereto

is the shop of Firouz Ali the barber. There you can get your heads shaved, for without doubt after your long journey they will need the razor."

"Inshallah! Please God, Firouz Ali the barber shall shave us to-morrow; and then we will sell our horses, and after go to the baths and be rubbed and scented, and so be refreshed for the homeward way."

"May peace attend you!" said the dervish. He left them, returned to his own corner, and after telling his beads lay down on his carpet to rest. In a few minutes the whole company in the inn was buried in sleep.

CHAPTER II

THE BARBER OF BAGDAD

Some while before dawn next morning, when Yusuf roused his party, the corner where the dervish had lain was vacant.

"Where is the holy man, khanji?" he

asked.

"Who am I that I should know?" replied the innkeeper. "He was there; he is there no longer. Without doubt he took up his bed and departed while we slept."

"Wallahi! I would have had further speech with him," said Yusuf. "But we are in the hands of Allah. Give me the

reckoning, khanji."

The world was still scarcely light when the horsemen took their departure. Their fellow guests broke into shrill questions and expostulations: why not wait for the rest and all go together? Yusuf did not answer. As they passed the slumbering forms of the pilgrims, who had slept outside, the old priest stirred, raised himself on his elbow, and watched them. His lank grey locks hung down in disorder over his hollow cheeks, forming a screen through which his eyes, shining with the unnatural brightness of an opium-eater, could scarcely be seen. A smile of scorn curled his lips, and he muttered inaudibly.

For a while the horsemen followed the road. Then they struck off into the desert south-westward by a track that would bring them to the south-east of the city. Being able frequently to change their mounts, they rode rapidly, abridging the usual midday rest, and it still wanted an hour of sunset when they descried the gilded domes and minarets of Bagdad rising above confused masses of flat-topped houses and groups of palm trees. But the sun had gone down when they reached the outskirts, and the dusk mingled with a light haze from the river.

Just outside the gate they were stopped

by a picket of soldiers.

"Who are you? Whence do you come? What is your errand?" were the questions fired at them by the non-commissioned officer.

"Peace be with you, noble warrior," said Yusuf. "We are come from the great

chief Asker, my master, who, hearing that horses were needed by the captains, sent us with the mettle of his pasture as gifts in the holy cause."

The soldier came close and whispered. He knew that no Arab chief would give if he had the chance of selling, and he sought a private arrangement with Yusuf by which he would receive a percentage of the proceeds of the hoped-for sale. Yusuf made no demur, having not the slightest intention of returning the same way.

The horsemen entered the city. Almost immediately they met in the narrow street a small party of Turkish cavalry, preceded by a man on foot, who, wielding a long staff, shouted, "Make way! Make way for Schechter Pasha!" The Turks cleared a path unceremoniously, riding down any of the pedestrians who were unable to squeeze themselves out of the way. Yusuf's party, however, was too large to be swept aside. A halt was inevitable. The Turks cursed the Arabs in the name of the Prophet and the twelve imams, and Yusuf, anxious to get on, gave them soft answers. At length, the horses of both parties having been ranged, with much prancing and curvetting, in two files, one on each side of the street,

progress in opposite directions was about to be resumed.

The German officer in Turkish uniform, who had watched the scene in silence, at the moment of riding off whispered to the Turkish orderly behind him. This man left the file, and moved his horse sidelong across the street till he reached Yusuf's young companion.

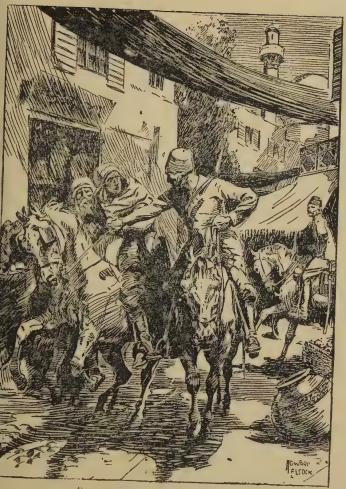
"I take this horse," he said, laying his hand on the bridle of the fine Arab the young man rode. "It is needed for the

service of the Padishah."

"Peace be with you!" Yusuf interposed, turning his horse. "Is not this beast sent by my master Asker as a present for the Bey himself? By the light of my eyes, it will go ill with us if the beast comes to any other hands."

"So you deny me, son of a dog?" cried the Turk. "Who is this mighty fellow that raises his voice against the servants of the Padishah?"

Yusuf answered angrily: the wrangle waxed hotter and hotter, and promised to come to blows. But at a curt command from the German officer the Turk went back across the road. There was a brief consultation between them, at the end of



"I TAKE THIS HORSE," HE SAID.

which the German opened his pocket-book and counted out a number of notes. With these in his hand the Turk returned to Yusuf's side.

"This or nothing," he said.

Yusuf looked contemptuously at the notes. They did not represent half the price of the horse, and he doubted whether it would be possible to turn them into cash. But the situation was difficult. Forcible resistance in a town filled with Turkish soldiery could end only in death or the bastinado. All things considered, he would be lucky to lose but one of the horses. He decided to yield. But it is not the Oriental way to yield gracefully. He protested, talking of his master's rage, the disappointment of the Bey, the paltriness of the price; and only when he noticed signs of impatience in the German did he come to a sudden stop, pocket the notes, and bid the rider of the coveted horse dismount. A gleam of pleasure lit up the German's eyes as the animal was brought to him. The two parties went their several ways, Yusuf cursing under his breath.

"What will be, will be," he said at length.

"May the twelve curses light on the kafir and the children of iniquity with him!"

"The German has a good eye for a horse," said the youth who had been deprived of his mount. "That was the best beast of them all. More's the pity!" He took the loss with strange calmness. It was almost as if he had expected some such event. To be sure, the animal belonged to Asker, not to him; but such indifference was hardly natural to a youth, unless his mind was occupied by far more weighty matters. That this was the case seemed certain from his next remark.

"Now, shall I go to Firouz Ali to-night?

I am in a hurry, you know."

"Haste is a fever," said Yusuf. "It is not well to seek the barber to-night: he may be busy. My counsel is that you visit him to-morrow at midday when Bagdad is asleep. By that time, too, please God, I shall have disposed of the horses."

"Very well. I am very tired."

They made their way to a caravanserai, stabled the horses, and after a hearty supper curled themselves on their mats and slept.

Towards noon on the following day, when Bagdad lay broiling in the sun, and the streets were almost empty except for the yellow dogs that sprawled here and there, too hot and enervated even to snap at the

flies, a young Arab might have been seen sauntering along, as if aimlessly, like a countryman whiling away an hour in seeing the sights. He had been to a hammam, and gone through the soaping and kneading and joint-pulling that make the Turkish bath so refreshing; he had strolled through the bazars; and now, while most of the inhabitants, anticipating the midday rest, were fighting the heat and the scorpions in their underground chambers, he was on his way to visit Firouz Ali, the barber of Bagdad.

The direction had been minutely given him by Yusuf. The barber's shop was near the south gate of the city. It was easily found. A few stone steps led up from the street to the open front, above which was a low latticed grating, and an embroidered flag indicating the owner's trade. Shaving and the other operations of the barber were often performed in the open, on the platform to which the steps led; but at this time of day, in the full glare of the sun, the platform was deserted. Within, however, in the shade and the gloom, the youth saw the barber cleaning the ears of a muleteer, while another customer, a Persian merchant, to judge by his costume, sat

waiting his turn on a three-legged stool. In the background the barber's apprentice, a tall but slightly hump-backed lad, was stirring a pot of lather.

The young Arab mounted the steps, and passed from the sunlight into the shaded shop.

"Peace be with you!" said the barber,

turning his head.

"And with you," was the reply, as the newcomer seated himself on a carpet. Similar greetings passed between him and the Persian.

"Wallahi!" the barber grunted. "Why, in the name of the Prophet (upon whom be blessing and peace!), do customers honour me at this hour, when all should be taking their rest? I melt, and become as a sodden fleece."

"Yes, it is hot," said the youth, "and as I see an effendi still awaits your attention, I

will go and come again."

"Not so, not so. It would ill become me in these busy times to turn away a customer. By my father's head, it is only these few months past that I have earned enough to buy my rice and onions. Be patient, and in good time I will shave your head, trim your nails-whatever you please,"

The newcomer and the waiting Persian exchanged a few words; but it was too hot to talk, and after a moment or two they relapsed into silence. When the muleteer was despatched, the Persian took his place on the stool. The apprentice removed his cap and lathered his head, and the barber then, having stropped his razor on a leathern strap hanging from his belt, shaved his skull clean except for a tuft in the middle.

After the Persian had departed, the barber

turned to the apprentice.

"Go to the knife-grinder's with these scissors," he said, "and wait while he sharpens them. I will attend to the effendimyself."

He signed to his customer to take the

stool vacated by the Persian.

"I have not come to be shaved, Firouz

Ali," said the youth.

"Well do I know that," said the barber at once. "Yet you would do well to appear to be a customer. There are sharp eyes and ears in Bagdad."

The youth looked at him in surprise. He had never seen the barber before: yet the man's words seemed to show that he had himself been recognized. Still more startled was he by the barber's next remark.

"Who can stand against Fate? It is an unlucky day: there arose a dispute between Yusuf and the soldiers, and now Yusuf and the others are cast into prison."

"But I have only just left them," cried

the astounded youth.

"Only just?"

"Well, perhaps two hours ago, before I went to the baths."

"It is an hour since they were seized, and the Askaris are even now hunting for the sixth of the party."

The youth glanced apprehensively out

through the open shop-front.

"Are you sure it is true?" he asked. He had had hints of the mysterious rapidity with which Firouz Ali got news of what was happening in Mesopotamia; but it was staggering to find that he had learnt within an hour of the arrest of Yusuf and his companions, from whom the youth had parted so recently.

"On my head be it!" said the barber. "They went into the market with their There were soldiers about. them came an old mullah and accused Yusuf of consorting with kafirs and moreover stealing the horses; whereupon the soldiers seized him, and declared that the horses

were confiscate. And the mullah flung himself about in a frenzy, and shrieked that the kafir was not with them, and they instantly went about to search for him, a Russian, as they believe, come to spy upon them."

"What shall I do, Firouz Ali? You know me, it appears; I am Roger Burnet. My father is dead: you were a friend of his, and I came to you to help me. You see, I felt I ought to join my own countrymen, and Asker said that you would help me. I had thought of making my way into Persia, and so avoiding the main Turkish lines; but Asker advised against that. He is on bad terms with his neighbours south and east, who have thrown in their lot with the Turks; and he said that a lonely traveller from his country attempting to pass into Persia would hardly escape with his life."

"All that I know, Aga," said the barber. "It is true that you would almost certainly fail to get through the Turkish lines on the river about Kut. It is easy enough to get in and out of Bagdad; but there is strict watch on the river. Yet, praise God, nothing is impossible. To-morrow a convoy goes down. If you would deign to be a kelakii--"

"Anything, to get down the river," cried Roger. A kelakji, as he knew, was a raftsman, employed on one of the skin rafts that are commonly used on the Tigris for the conveyance of passengers and goods.

"That I could arrange for you. Truly there would be a certain risk: but if you were discreet, Aga, you might journey safely as far as the Turkish lines. There, on my

life! the difficulties would begin."

"I must take my chance. But wait: I cannot leave Bagdad while Yusuf and the others are imprisoned. I must first see them free."

"By my eyes, that is impossible. What can you do for them? Their blanket is spread in a wet place. Moreover, troubles are heaped up like the clouds; for it is told me that the Turkish column now gathering yonder to the north-east will fall upon Asker as it marches against the Russians, and will punish him because he will not take part in the war."

"He must be warned."

"Ahi! The fleetest mare in Bagdad is already skimming the sand of the desert. Asker will know in time, and in his strong place he will defy the dogs. These things I tell you, Aga, which my lips would not

whisper in the ears of my dearest friend, because you are the son of your father, whom I loved."

"I know you were his friend," said Roger, rather moved.

"He was my light, and my light is gone out."

Roger fell into thought. His Arab friends were soon to be at grips with the Turks. The Turks were at war with Britain. By doing his little best to aid the Arabs he was fighting his country's enemies, perhaps more efficiently, untrained as he was, than he could for a long time hope to do if he got through to his own people below Kut. "Do the duty that lies nearest," some one had said. This was clearly the job to his hand. Loyalty to his Arab friends; duty to his own country; both appeared to point in the same direction.

"I am going back to Asker, Firouz Ali," he said at last.

Before the barber could reply, an Arab came swiftly into the shop. Outwardly calm, he was labouring under suppressed excitement.

"The Askari dogs come this way," he said. "They are on the scent of a young man of the Beni Lam."

Firouz Ali moved hastily towards the entrance, and caught sight of a party of soldiers marching down the street. Turning quickly, he flung over Roger the loose white tunic discarded by the apprentice before he left, replaced his boots by a pair of white felt slippers, altered his head-gear, and thrust a bottle into his hand.

"You are my apprentice, Aga. Hunch your back. Pour from that bottle into this bowl: you are mixing a shampoo. By the mercy of God we will cheat these sons of dogs. Mashallah! Their wits are blunt as a camel's nose."

When the soldiers arrived, the barber was shaving the head of the Arab who had just entered, and behind him a hunch-backed lad was busily mixing liquids in a bowl. A river boatman preceded the soldiers up the steps.

"On my head be it!" he said.

is where I saw the Beni Lam enter."

"How say you, barber?" cried the sergeant in command of the squad. "Where

is that vile jackal from the hills?"

"Wallahi!" exclaimed Firouz Ali. "Who has been eating dirt? True it is that some while since there came to me such a one as you say, and after I had cleaned his foul

ears he departed, having asked of me the way to the river. No doubt he is a very vile person."

The sergeant swung round upon the boat-

man.

"You camel!" he cried. "You blind bat! You insect without understanding! Why did you let this vile kafir vanish out

of your sight?"

"By the Beard, I did that which I had promised to do. I saw this kafir enter here, and straightway ran to tell you. Is it on my head that you came no faster? And now where is that reward that was offered me? I have done that whereto I was bound; now therefore give me the money."

"O foolish one, rather give thanks to God that I do not have your feet beaten to a jelly. The kafir has escaped the toils: get you gone, and when you find him bring

me word again."

The boatman, grumbling shrilly, left the shop. During this altercation Firouz Ali had continued imperturbably to shave the Arab.

"And you, barber," cried the angry sergeant, "why is not that youth of yours bearing arms against the kafirs? Surely

that is better work for a man than mixing messes for the toilet."

"Peace be with you," said the barber.
"It is even as you say. But you perceive he has an infirmity, and moreover I cannot do without him. How should I serve the noble captains of the army, either here or at their quarters, if I had none to help me? By my father's eyes, 'twas only yesterday that your own colonel proclaimed me the best barber in Bagdad. Bethink you how it comforts a great captain to know that his poll will be treated nobly, by the hands of a cunning craftsman."

"Put a bridle on your tongue, barber: it wags like the clapper of a bell. Come, let us go search again for that kafir, and rest not till we find him. Inshallah! we will feast on a fat lamb when we have laid

him safely in fetters."

He led his men away, and Firouz Ali murmured a heartfelt "Mashallah!"

CHAPTER III

HIDE AND SEEK

"Hassan, your sconce is sore with much shaving," said the barber to the Arab who had brought timely warning of the soldiers. "Get you gone now, friend, for if I have to shave you again I shall stand in danger of the law for blood-letting. Follow the rascal boatman, and see what new mischief he goes about to work."

When the Arab had gone, Firouz Ali continued:

"And now, Aga, it behoves us to fashion some device without delay. Those dull-witted dogs of Turks will perchance come back: my apprentice—he, too, dull of wit, for it would suit me very ill to have a needle-wit here—will return bringing my scissors, and if he finds you are yet in my shop, even he will wonder. Go further into the shadow until I have spied up and down."

Keeping well in shadow, the barber mounted a stool and peered into the street

through the lattice-work above his shopfront. He swallowed an execration and got down.

"Wallahi!" he exclaimed. "By all the imams, there sits on the ground not far away an old man with straggling locks and fierce eyes, eating onions. Belike he is that mullah who, as it was told me, cried out upon Yusuf in the market."

"Let me see," said Roger, jumping on the stool. "Yes, it is he. As we rode with the kafila, he tried to stir the pilgrims against us. He must have travelled

fast."

"What! Say you so? Let my eyes once more behold him."

He looked closely through the lattice at the sordid figure. At first Firouz Ali seemed merely curious; then his brow wrinkled with perplexity, and he gazed earnestly as if to solve a puzzle. At last his expression changed to astonishment.

"Allah il Allah!" he cried. "What an ass-head am I! As you love your eyes, Aga, you must hide yourself. That mullah—may he shrivel!—is a spy, the cunningest of those that serve the Pashas. Come with

me."

He led Roger to the back of the shop,

where he stripped off the apprentice's apron, then hurried him up a narrow stairway to a low loft above the ceiling. The place was hot as an oven, and Roger gasped for breath.

"Here you must stay," said the barber, "until the way is safe. Let not a loud breathing or a rustle be heard. Who knows how near is the peril?... What! Is not that the shuffling feet of my apprentice I hear?"

Shutting the door upon Roger, he hastened below. Through the thin plaster of the ceiling Roger heard the conversation that ensued.

"Mashallah! Here, master, are the scissors, well ground, and my legs totter under me, so great is the heat."

"Now hearken, Mahmoud: open the gates of your poor understanding, and give heed to my words. By the holy Caaba, you stand in great danger."

"Ahi! What is it, master?"

"The captains are seeking young men, to make soldiers of them. While you were gone upon your errand there came to me a youth, begging refuge from a band of Askaris that were even then hunting him. What! Should I give him up to them? What am

I come to? No: I straightway clad him in your apron, and bade him lift his shoulders until his form was in the likeness of yours; and lo! when the Askaris entered, here was my apprentice mixing a shampoo. Do you heed me?"

"Truly, master, the young man was doing

my work. Blessings on him!"

"Moreover, I bade the sergeant look at his back, and say whether he was a proper man to serve in arms. But now, if the soldiers return, and see you, it may be that they will refuse to believe you are in truth my apprentice, and will seize you, and carry you away, and put you into a coat of their mud colour, and try to straighten that poor back of yours, which would give you much pain; besides, who should undo the work of God? If then they come back, you must swear by Osman, by the sword of Omar, by all that is holy, that you are indeed Mahmoud my apprentice, that you were here mixing a shampoo while I shaved an Arab, that you heard them ask for an Arab of Beni Lam, who, I declared, had gone forth some while before. Now, say your lesson after me."

He repeated the instructions, one by one,

the boy echoing him.

"That is well," said Firouz Ali at the close. "See to it that you forget not a tittle of all that, or they will make a soldier of you, and without doubt in a short while you will be scattered into little pieces by a Russian shell. Moreover, I will call down a thousand curses on your head."

There was silence for a while; no fresh customers arrived, and Roger hoped that the barber's expectation of a return visit from the soldiers would not be justified. If they did come, could Mahmoud be trusted to remember his part? Apparently Firouz Ali was not too sure of him, for once or twice during the succeeding hour he went over it again, detail by detail. And then Roger heard the dull tramp of the soldiers.

"What, barber, do you deal treacherously with us?" cried the sergeant. "We have hasted down to the river, and never a sign of that Beni Lam, that infidel dog, did we see. Come, what dirt are you eating? Bismillah! Tell me where the dog is, or I

will hale you off to the jail."

"Aman! aman! what cursed fate is this? By my beard, what more can I say? What can I do? Maybe the Arab, though he asked the way to the river, yet went another way. God is great!"

Meanwhile the sergeant's gaze, roving round the shop, had settled upon the misshapen figure of Mahmoud, who, with his back turned, was nervously fingering the phials on the shelf.

"Who is that? Do my eyes cheat me? Or can it be that the boy yonder is uglier

than he was before?"

"Bismillah! That is impossible," said the barber, spreading out his hands. "Sorely is he afflicted."

- "Are there twins? On your head be it, barber: where is the boy that stood there before?"
- "Am I blind?" cried the barber. "Have I lost my wits? That is Mahmoud my apprentice, and he has no brother. What is this talk of twins? Can a soldier see double? That, I say, is Mahmoud, who, but for his crooked back, would without doubt be handling a rifle for the Padishah. Did I not ask you to mark his infirmity? Mahmoud, did you not hear me?"

"Yes, in truth, master," said the boy; "I was mixing a shampoo while you shaved an Arab."

"And what did I say to your master? Tell me that, boy."

"You asked him concerning an Arab of Beni Lam."

"A vile jackal from the hills," prompted Firouz Ali.

"True, a vile jackal from the hills," repeated the boy, his wits sharpened by his fears. "And my master declared that he had gone forth some while before."

"Having asked me the way to the river."

"True, the way to the river, which every one knows."

"There is but one God!" exclaimed the sergeant. "What the boy says is true. Yet he seems uglier than when I saw him before. Curses on the beard of that boatman! It is rage that distorts my vision. But we will scour every corner of Bagdad and find the infidel dog. Is there not a price upon his head? Peace be unto you, barber."

Roger heard the soldiers tramp out, and breathed more freely,—if he could be said to breathe in his cramped and stuffy quarters.

"Mashallah! You are a good boy," said the barber to Mahmoud, "and I will reward you. But see that you say nothing to any man of all this. Remember that they will make you a soldier if they can, and straighten your back, causing you great anguish." Roger had to remain penned up in the hot narrow loft until a late hour, when Mahmoud went home and the barber prepared to close the shop. Itching with the heat and parched with thirst, he could not sleep, nor even take any interest in the scraps of conversation between Firouz Ali and his customers. His relief was unutterable when release came at last, and he could bathe his face in the barber's basin.

"But the danger is not past," said Firouz Ali. "It is not safe for you to go. That dog of a mullah still sits in the street, and the reek of his onions tickles my nostrils even here. But I have a device to deal with him. Wait but a little. I will go forth as if to enjoy the cool of the evening, and feign to bar my shop-front, but leaving it in truth unbarred. By and by, if you should hear the mullah yonder utter a loud and bitter cry, and high voices, and the sound of a great contention like the wrangle of cats, then do you swiftly pass out into the street, not going towards the mullah, but in the contrary direction, and make your way to the caravanserai of hook-nosed Yakoub. There you will be safe, and there I will find you; and then, please God, I will set your feet upon a sure road."

It was perhaps half an hour later. The dusk had faded into dark. The streets were busy with people, come out of their houses to breathe cool air. A man, strolling up towards the barber's, happened to stumble over the huddled form of the mullah, who had kept his place all through the hot day, and at nightfall had only moved nearer to the shop. There was a shrill and angry outburst from the victim, to which the clumsy wayfarer—an agent of the barber's, for Firouz Ali was too shrewd to appear himself-rejoined with a torrent of abuse. The altercation drew a crowd of idle onlookers to the spot, and the mullah was hemmed in their midst.

At this moment the door in the barber's shop-front was silently opened, and Roger slipped out. Turning his back on the throng, from the centre of which the cries of the disputants mingled with the laughter and jeers of the spectators, he ran up the street towards the well-known caravanserai of Yakoub near the mosque. To the innkeeper the mention of Firouz Ali's name was enough. Avoiding the public room, he took Roger through a private garden behind, unlocked a door in the wall, and admitted him to a little room furnished with divans and nar-

ghils—the water-pipes which Orientals make

a show of smoking.

"May you live many years, and may your abundance increase!" he said politely. "Here, in due time, will Firouz Ali come to you."

CHAPTER IV

A HIGH DIVE

ROGER heaved a happy sigh as he sank down into the soft cushions.

"What a brick Firouz Ali is!" he thought.

Before to-day Firouz Ali had been merely a name to him; but it was a name upon which he had built up many curious imaginings. For the barber of Bagdad was not merely what he seemed.

Many years before, in a solitary spot, Mr. Burnet had discovered a man lying wounded, almost at the point of death. Filling the part of Good Samaritan, he took the man to his tent and nursed him back to health. His name was Firouz Ali; he explained that he was the brother of Asker, chief of one of the Beni Lam tribes, and had received his wounds in a fray with Turkish raiders, who had slain all his companions. He repaid Mr. Burnet's kindness with a dog-like fidelity and devotion. When

fully recovered, he introduced the Englishman to his brother, and so laid the foundation of a lasting friendship between them.

Like the Arabs generally, Firouz Ali hated the Turks, and his ill-treatment at the hands of a Turkish band had but heightened his detestation. As he grew older, this feeling became the motive power in his life. Mr. Burnet had talked to him about his dreams of the regeneration of Mesopotamia, and Firouz Ali had forthwith begun to see visions himself. While the English enthusiast was concerned with what may be called the physical aspect of the problem—the development of the soil by means of irrigation and the processes of science—the Arab thought only of the human aspect. To him, the backwardness of his country was due wholly to the tyranny and corruption of the Turkish Government. Its merciless severity, its continual "grinding of the faces of the poor," awoke in him a passionate indignation, and for some years past he had bent all his energies to the task of bringing the Arab tribes together and cultivating a corporate spirit among them, with the ultimate aim of throwing off the Turkish yoke. It was a giant's work: the Arab is a child in anything that demands

organization; he is so jealous of his individual freedom and of the interests of his tribe that the meaning and the value of co-operation are ideas almost beyond him. But Firouz Ali was never despondent. He went hither and thither about the plains, carrying his message from tribe to tribe, hoping always that sooner or later it would take root in the minds of his countrymen, and that before he died he would see an abundant harvest—peace, order, and prosperity, as in the days of the Arab kaliphs of old.

His brother Asker was a man of a different stamp. He hated the Turks no less, but his ideals and ambitions never strayed beyond the interests of his own tribe. A warrior of no little renown, he succeeded, in his rocky stronghold, in preserving a certain independence of the Turkish governors representing the Sultan in Bagdad. He had a great admiration for Mr. Burnet, but never professed to be able to understand his grandiose projects for the revival of the ancient glories of Mesopotamia. While he agreed with Firouz Ali that the first condition of a restored prosperity was the expulsion of the Turk, yet, so long as he kept the finger of the Turk out of his own special pie, he was not greatly concerned about the troubles of his neighbours, with whom, indeed, he always had a private quarrel or two on hand. Even when the Great War broke out his attitude did not greatly change. "A plague on both your houses!" might have expressed it. Though he admired Mr. Burnet, he had no love for the English, or indeed for the Russians, or any other race than his own; and his hatred of the Turks did not prevent him, as a good Mohammedan, from regarding the war as in some sort a war of true believers against infidels. To identify himself with the latter was too much for his religious scruples; to aid the former would strain his self-respect and sap his independence. His settled policy was to keep out of the war if possible.

Firouz Ali, on the other hand, hailed the war as a means towards the realization of his aims. The early successes of the British far down the rivers filled him with joy. Considering how he could best further their cause, which was also his, he arrived at the conclusion that he would be most useful in the heart of the enemy's camp, as a gleaner of information and a focus for the interests he represented. For this reason, in the winter of 1914 he had settled in Bagdad as

a barber; the barber's shop, there as elsewhere, being the centre of a varied social life, where men of all ranks and occupations consorted, and the news of the day was discussed. There too his private agents brought him tidings that never reached the public ear, and his shop became a sort of clearing-house of secret intelligence.

Mr. Burnet had spent his last days in Asker's stronghold. After his death, when Roger told the chief of his determination to join the British forces, Asker at once recommended him to seek the advice and assistance of the barber, and it was with that end in view that Roger had joined the kafila.

Roger had reclined for little more than an hour in Yakoub's secluded apartment when the door opened, and Firouz Ali entered, followed by Yakoub himself bearing a tray of cakes, sweetmeats and sherbet. He laid this on a table and retired.

"Mashallah! The mullah is still eating onions and gazing at my shop-front," said the barber. "When morning comes he will be sick of a great sickness, and will rend his clothes with rage."

"And what am I to do?" asked Roger.

"Here we shall remain, we two, until the city sleeps: then I will take you where you may abide in peace until I have laid my plans. Eat and drink, for if the body is weak the spirit fails."

It was about midnight when Firouz Ali declared the hour had come. The time had evidently been arranged with Yakoub, for the innkeeper came in, bringing a bag of bread and a gourd of water, unlocked a door concealed behind hangings on the opposite side of the room, and let his visitors out into a narrow lane. They hurried along, Firouz Ali leading the way in the dark with the sureness of familiarity, turning into an alley here, crossing an open space there, until presently they arrived at a twostoreyed godown on the bank of the river. He unlocked an inconspicuous side-door. and ushered Roger into a low storeroom smelling strongly of dates. In one corner was a ladder, giving access to the upper floor. This they mounted, and found themselves in one of a series of rooms, divided from one another by slight partitions, which had been allowed, as usual in the East, to fall into disrepair, and each partly filled with boxes of dates.

"Here you may lie down in safety," said

Firouz Ali. "I must go; for the mullah keeps vigil at my shop, and it is fitting that he should see me enter, and watch for my coming forth again on the morrow. Ahi! He will watch in vain. A trusty messenger will seek you here. Peace be with you!"

Roger was left to himself, and the rats: he heard them scurrying about behind the partitions. He looked out of a narrow unglazed opening in the wall. The moon, rising behind him, threw a yellow gleam on the ripples of the river flowing past the base of the storehouse. On the right was a door in the outer wall, secured by a wooden bar. Looking through a chink in the wood he saw a small platform, for hoisting goods, jutting out over the stream. Faint noises came from the distance, punctuating the regular plashing of the water on the wall. For a while Roger contemplated the stars; then he gathered some of the straw matting used for wrapping the dates, and lying down on it, tried to sleep. But the events of the day had taxed his nerves; fatigued as he was, his excited brain, his uncomfortable couch, and the movements of the rats kept him awake. At dawn he heard the shrill tones of muezzins calling the faithful to prayer from minaret after minaret; only then did he fall into a restless slumber.

It was broad daylight when he awoke. His first act was to go to the window and, keeping out of sight, watch the traffic on the river, many kelaks and other craft laden with stores and troops passing down to the Turkish lines below Kut-el-Amara. Then he made a breakfast of bread and dates and water, and went to the window again. How long was he to remain cooped up here? What could he do to kill time? He walked all over the godown: it contained nothing but dates. What a tumbledown place it was! That made for its safety as a hiding-place, no doubt, for were it otherwise, it would be used by the troops for billets or storage.

The long day dragged itself out tediously. Roger grew restless. Would Firouz Ali's messenger never come? He watched the sun sink over the river, edging the trees and the buildings with a ruddy gold; he listened to the songs of the boatmen, and the boom of guns at artillery practice; and then, when all the world was dark and silent, he heard the sound of the door opening below. His nerves tingled; he stood taut and watchful: was this newcomer a

friend? Dull footsteps rustled like dry leaves on the ladder; in the doorway stood a shadowy figure.

"Peace be with you!" said a deep

melodious voice.

Roger started. Where had he heard that voice before?

"And with you," he replied.

The man came forward. It was too dark to see his face.

"Firouz Ali sends greeting," the voice went on; and then Roger recognized it.

"You are the holy man we saw in the khan?" he asked.

"You have said it, Aga. And I am your servant."

Instinctively Roger stretched out his hand, and found it held in a firm clasp. "That's odd," he thought, a moment afterwards. "I don't remember shaking hands with an Arab before."

"You are a friend of Firouz Ali?" he said.

"An old friend. He bids you be patient. It was hard to reach this place unseen. In truth, I believe men followed me like shadows, but I am confident I shook them off. Be watchful and discreet."

"What is being done to get me away? Why am I kept here?"

"You will know all when the time is ripe. I have brought bread and fresh water. Stay your mind on hope. All will be well."

Quickly he slipped away. Roger heard the door close below. He felt vaguely puzzled. What was there about this dervish that perplexed him? He had the poorest opinion of dervishes in general: they were sly, greedy, canting, often fanatical. But this man had a certain dignity, a manner that bespoke confidence and trust. Roger wished that he could have seen the

expression of his face as he spoke.

The next day passed. Roger dozed it away. Again at nightfall came the dervish with a supply of food. But he had no information to give. "Be patient" was the sum of his talk. Roger felt the same sense of well-being and security. On the morning of the third day he found himself wishing with a strange intensity of eagerness for night to bring his visitor again. But he had not to wait so long. It was in the full noontide heat that he was startled out of a doze by a slight sound in the room below. Springing up, he hurried to a hole in the floor and peeped through. His momentary dread vanished. The figure ascending the ladder was that of the dervish. Roger

hurried to meet him, and gazed earnestly into his face. The features were finely cut but haggard; the tanned cheeks deeply lined; the eyes deep set and piercing; the straggling beard almost white.

"The hour is at hand," said the dervish. As Roger remembered afterwards, he had omitted the customary salutation for the first time. "To-morrow, a little before the dawn, you will leave this place and go straight towards the south gate of the city. I have brought garments for you to wear. Two hundred paces from the gate you will meet a basket-maker with two asses, going out to gather reeds from the river banks. Him you will join; he will call you his son Nadan, and will give you one of the asses to drive. With him you will go forth from the gate; he is furnished with a pass. When you can no longer be seen from the walls, you will turn aside from the river, and make your way south-eastward across the plain. At the appointed spot you will meet Yusuf."

"Yusuf! Has he been set free?"

"But how do you know? If he has not

[&]quot;He has not been set free, neither has he escaped. Yet he will meet you with his four companions twelve miles from the city."

escaped, how will he escape? Why are you so sure?"

"The manner of his escape I know not: that is on the head of Firouz Ali. Be assured that he has set all things in order."

"I am grateful, to him and to you. Will

you not tell me your name?"

"It is better that you should not know it yet. I may tell it hereafter. Now I leave you; may abundance of peace be yours!"

He laid a bundle of clothing at Roger's feet and went away.

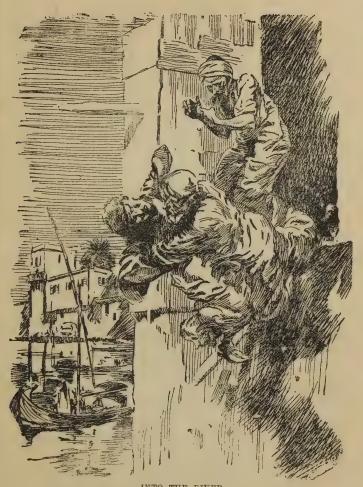
The garments consisted of the usual skin cap and smock of the ass-driver. The bundle contained also a short goad. Roger put the things on, concealed his own clothes among the boxes of dates, and sat down again to await with restless impatience the longed-for moment.

It was little more than an hour later when he was surprised by the sound of the door opening below, followed by stealthy footsteps. Had the dervish returned for some reason? Feeling uneasy, Roger bent to the floor, and peered through the hole. Three men had entered the room below. They separated, one remaining at the door, the others going through the partitions

from room to room, with the manifest object of making a systematic search.

Roger was aghast. They would come upstairs; he must be discovered. With the man at the door, escape by the ladder was impossible. He looked wildly round. The open window! It was too narrow. The platform! He might dive from it into the river twenty feet below. But how would that serve him? He could swim, but a man could run faster. When perforce he should land, ready hands would seize him. But perhaps the men would not ascend to the upper floor after all.

He went back to the hole. The two searchers had returned. They were mounting the ladder. To resist was hopeless; whatever came of it, he must dive for liberty. He ran to the door in the wall, and pushed up the bar that secured it. It fell clattering to the floor. There was a yell from behind. Roger instantly realized that before he could thrust open the clumsy door the nearest pursuer must be upon him. Turning, he looked into the wild features of the mullah. The sight braced him: he leapt towards the fanatic, struck out with all his strength, and hurled the lean and withered wretch back upon his companion behind.



INTO THE RIVER.

While they lay in a heap, he dashed back to the door and threw himself against it. Stiff with disuse and rust, its hinges refused to act. Desperate now, Roger urged it with all the force of his shoulder. The door yielded, but as he stumbled on to the platform the mullah, who had been the topmost, and the first to recover himself, sprang forward and held him in a frantic clutch. Roger struggled to free himself: he was young and strongly built; his captor was old as age goes in the East, but wiry, and he gripped with extraordinary tenacity.

The platform, crazy with decay, groaned as the two swayed to and fro. The mullah's companions were both pressing forward to assist him. One of them seized Roger's arm. He wrenched himself free; and the violence of his movement hurled him, and the mullah clinging to him, over the edge of

the platform into the river.

CHAPTER V

THE KELAK

ROGER was conscious of a scream, shouts, a violent thud. The waters closed over him; the bony arms of the mullah tightened upon him. He struggled desperately to free himself. The mullah had been undermost when they struck the water, and the tightening of his grip was only momentary. Roger butted him away, and came gasping to the surface.

As he shook the water from his eyes, it seemed to him that he was surrounded by fantastic shapes. Multitudinous noises thrummed in his ears. But these were partly illusions resulting from the shock of his unprepared dive. In reality, the two men on the platform above were gesticulating and shouting to the boatmen in one or two kelaks and other small craft which were floating down stream in the shimmering haze of noon.

In a moment or two Roger had recovered

his breath and his wits: automatically he had kept himself afloat. He looked about him. There was no sign of the mullah. But to attempt to land would be to court disaster: if he should manage to elude the pursuers for a while, his wet tracks would betray him, and he would soon be run down.

He was floating with the stream. Half turning, he saw, just behind him, almost opposite to the godown, and about twenty yards from the bank, a big kelak, such as were employed for transporting army stores down the river. On the principle "any port in a storm" he struck off towards this huge and clumsy raft. The men on the platform were yelling to the raftsmen to catch him, and though they were not explaining why with any coherence, they repeated the word kafir too often for Roger's peace of mind. Still, if only he could climb on board, he might be able to invent some plausible explanation that would yield him at any rate a brief breathing-space.

But this hope gave way to alarm, for the men on the platform, moderating their excitement, became more intelligible. Roger could now distinctly hear their words.

"Ahi! Ahi! The dog of a kafir! He

is a spy! He has drowned a holy mullah! Ya Allah! He is swimming. Catch him! Put him in fetters! We will come and take him into our charge."

The raftsmen were watching him. It seemed to Roger that the kelak was likely to prove no better refuge than the shore. He trod water for a moment or two, at a loss to know what to do. Suddenly an idea came to him,—an idea born of experience. More than once he had made river journeys with his father on one of these typical Mesopotamian craft. If the voyage had been of any considerable length, by the time it ended the vessel was usually in a somewhat ragged condition. He remembered how interested he had been in its construction. Something over two hundred inflated sheepskins were tied on to two layers of poplar poles put crosswise, forming a raft about eighteen or twenty feet square. At one end were a couple of huts made of felt stretched across upright poles: they extended across almost the whole width of the raft, and were about five feet high. In these the crew slept, cooked, and ate. The rest of the space was occupied by the cargo, which was so arranged as to trim the simple craft.

Now, through wear and tear and the accidents of travel, at the end of a voyage many of the skins had collapsed: some had broken away. The Oriental is apt to put off making repairs until the eleventh hour; and it was upon this characteristic that Roger relied for the success of the plan that had occurred to him.

Once more he floated down stream parallel with the kelak. Collecting himself for an effort, he swam towards the vessel, at the edge of which four or five men were bending, stretching out their hands or their poles for him to grasp. When still within several strokes of the side, he suddenly threw up his hands, gave a cry, and sank. Cries of "Allah!" broke from the men. No doubt they thought that Allah, or Shaitan, had disposed of the kafir, the traitor, the wretch who had drowned the holy mullah.

But as he sank, Roger turned over. The kelak was above him, shutting out the sunlight. He had only a few seconds to spare: if he could not find what he sought, breathlessness would compel him to come up and take his chance of capture. Exerting a great effort of will he swam on beneath the kelak, looking anxiously upward. There

was a gleam of daylight. He struck out towards it, reached up, and caught hold of one of the poles. At this point one of the inflated skins had been torn away, leaving a gap into which he could thrust his head and neck. He panted heavily; the space was just wide enough to give him room to breathe. A few inches above his head was the platform of the raft. He could barely keep his mouth and nostrils above water; indeed, every now and again a swirl filled the gap and half choked him.

Floating down thus, clinging to the nearest skin, he heard the rumble of voices above him, and some scurrying from one part of the raft to another. Presently the excitement died down. No doubt by this time the crew had concluded that he was drowned, as he had intended they should do when he flung up his hands and screamed a cry for help. The incident must have been seen by the men on the platform of the godown and by any one who happened to be on the bank. They would have come to the same conclusion, and only be sorry that Fate had baulked them of the chance of gaining a reward for the capture of a spy.

For half an hour or more he clung on.

It was an unpleasant experience, for his head was often submerged, and he gulped a good deal more of the muddy Tigris water than he cared for. Then, feeling pretty sure that by this time the pursuers on the bank had gone sorrowfully away, and that the crew of the raft would expect to see a ghost sooner than him, he dropped free, swam half a dozen strokes under water towards the side opposite to that which he had formerly approached, and came up, without splashing, about amidships. As he had hoped, he was screened from observation from above by a pile of stores heaped on deck. The only danger was that some one might notice him from the bank, and it was with great relief that he saw there was nobody passing at the moment.

With his head just above the surface he floated on more comfortably. The water was pleasantly cool without being cold enough to numb him; and he refreshed himself by frequently sousing his head. The broadening of the stream and the absence of embankments diminished the risk of his being seen by people on shore, and as all the craft that toiled up against the current passed on the further side of the kelak, his mind was easy on that score.

The day was waning. From former experience he knew that the crew would soon tie up for the night. That would give him an opportunity of slipping ashore, and making his way-whither? The question was rather disturbing. He was to have met the basket-maker near the south gate at dawn. It was doubtful whether he could reach the spot in time. Would the basketmaker go back and report that he had not turned up, or would he leave the city and make for the rendezvous with Yusuf? Roger wished that he had had the forethought to ask the dervish what was to be done if a check occurred. However, it was no good worrying. He had been very fortunate hitherto, and the great thing was that he would soon be on dry land again.

At last the sinking sun gave the signal for tying up. The crew poled the raft towards a row of stakes standing out of the water a few yards from the bank, and lashed their ropes securely to them. When they began this operation Roger swam round to the other side of the raft, and he remained there until they had finished. Then some of the men launched a kufa—one of those shallow circular boats, made of reeds overlaid with bitumen, which have been used

for thousands of years on the Tigris and the Euphrates—and paddled in towards the western bank. From what they said, Roger gathered that they were going to a village that lay at some little distance from the river. Only two men were left on guard.

"I could almost make off with the whole caboodle," thought Roger with a chuckle. "By the way, I wonder whether the cargo

is worth running off with?"

The suggestion tickled his sense of humour. He had no serious intention, of course, of attempting piracy; but he felt interested enough to discover the nature of the cargo.

Darkness fell. It was a hot evening. The men were drowsy. Roger heard them go into one of the deck-houses: presently they snored.

"Here goes!" he said to himself.

He swam to the stern of the raft, where there was a narrow space between its edge and the deck-houses. Moving with infinite caution, for the slightest swaying of the vessel would almost certainly be noticed by kelakjis accustomed to its behaviour, he climbed on to this narrow space. Fortunately the raft was so heavily laden that his weight was nothing in comparison: such movement as he caused might have been

made by a swirl of the current. The snores from the deck-house reassured him. He crept round, and saw to his delight that the door was half closed. It seemed perfectly safe to explore.

Keeping aside of a direct line with the door, he stole very carefully along. On one side of the raft were a number of small cases: their contents he could not determine. On the other stood several rows of open baskets, from which dark conical shapes projected slightly. He bent down, looked at them closely, touched them.

"By George! Shells for field guns!" he thought, "and the cases hold small arms ammunition, as sure as anything. What rummy beggars these Turks are!"

He was amazed that so large a consignment of valuable munitions was being sent down under so small a guard—indeed, under no guard at all, for the crew were certainly not soldiers, though they might have arms. "They must be very cocksure," he thought. Indeed, the talk in the caravanserai where he had put up with Yusuf a few nights before had dwelt on the smallness of the British forces and the great strength of the Turks and Arabs. The British, when the time came, were to be swept into the sea. All

the same, Roger wondered. Orientals are, it is true, notoriously careless; but it was strange that German discipline had not tightened up their organization in such a matter as this.

His discovery of the nature of the cargo set Roger thinking. These instruments of destruction would within a day or two carry death to his countrymen. "Not if I can prevent it," he said to himself with a grim setting of the lips. To purloin them and convey them as booty to the British was of course out of the question; but he might sink them. To do so would make him, in a sense, a combatant prematurely; but that idea filled him with joy. The chance of striking a first blow for his country in these strange circumstances was too good to be lost.

How could he do it? A few moments' consideration showed him the way. When he exchanged clothes in the godown he had taken the precaution to transfer the sharp knife which he always carried. His familiarity with the construction and appointments of the kelak enabled him to know where to lay hands on a light bamboo pole: one or two were usually kept in reserve in case any of those on which the deck-houses were

built happened to be broken by a storm. Near them were several lengths of cord. It was the work of a minute or two to lash his knife to the pole; then, creeping over and between the cases and the baskets, he prodded the supporting skins through the interstices of the raft's platform, wherever this was not encumbered with the stores.

His object being to sink the raft suddenly, he worked only in the middle, and left the outermost rows of skins to the last. He calculated that the inner skins, pierced from the top, would at once deflate, but the raft would still be supported by the outer skins. Then he would drop into the water and pierce the outer skins from beneath. The collapse of the skins through the outrush of air would almost certainly render the poles unable to support the weight of the cargo, and the whole structure would sink rapidly like a stone.

Careful to avoid making a noise, he worked without hurry. Once, the cessation of snores from the deck-house caused him to scuttle down behind one of the piles of ammunition cases, and wait there until reassured by the renewal of the sounds—as sweet to him then as any nightingale's song.

At last his work above deck was finished.

There was no perceptible sinking of the raft: the outer skins were still sufficient support. He dropped quickly into the water, and began rapidly to prod the skins on the landward side, where the mooring ropes would help to retard the inevitable tilt. But the effect of his work made itself felt even more quickly than he had expected. The raft took a very pronounced list. The men, awakening, became aware of it. Something, they knew not what, had happened to the skins on one side. Taught by experience they began to drag part of the cargo from that side to the other, crying on Allah, and cursing the invisible powers of mischief.

Their efforts only played into Roger's hands. Quietly swimming round the foreend of the raft, he pierced one after another the skins that supported the side that was now being overloaded. Before he had come to the end of the row, he saw that, like Samson, he would involve himself in the ruin if he did not get clear. Satisfied that a few seconds would bring about the collapse, he glided easily away, not forgetting to take his pole and knife, and struck out for the eastern shore. An otter could not have been less noticeable.



COLLAPSE.

He was only a few yards away when there was a great crash and rumble and gurgle behind him, accompanied by frenzied cries. Deprived of its supports, the overweighted side had sunk, and cases, baskets, and men had slipped in one tumbling cascade into the water. The ropes on the other side gave under the strain, and the raft, now empty except for the deck-houses, righted itself and slowly floated down with the stream.

The yells of alarm continued for a little, then ceased. Roger wondered, with a touch of compunction, whether the men were drowned. He was relieved when he heard the cries break out again, but with a different intonation and at a much greater distance. He guessed, as was indeed the fact, that the men had swum after the raft and clambered upon it, and were now shouting to attract the attention of their mates in the village. No further concerned with their fate, he swam steadily on until he felt beneath his feet the mud of the eastern shore. Wading with difficulty through ooze that sometimes topped his knees, he at last gained the firmer soil. Then, tired out but contented, he threw himself down to rest and think out his further course.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE DESERT

Ir was a hot night; but Roger, his soaked garments clinging closely to his body, felt a chill discomfort very different from his buoyant ease in the water. The fear of taking cold did not occur to him as it might have done to an older person, and when he got up, after a few minutes' repose, it was with the object of drying his clothes by movement. He was in a sorry plight, as he realized when he began to walk. His cap was gone: that was of no account at the moment, but it would be a worry next day, for he could not endure bare-headed the Mesopotamian sun. The rich alluvium of the river flats was dirt in the wrong place on his legs. That, however, could be scraped off when it dried. What troubled him was ignorance of the time and his whereabouts, and the probability that Firouz Ali's plans would be dislocated by his failing to meet the basket-maker.

Knowledge lacking, he had to fall back on guesswork. He tramped up and down over a hundred yards or so of space, afraid to stir far from the spot he had arrived at until he should have come to some decision. Where was he? The Tigris, running due south from Bagdad, makes a long bend eastward a few miles below the city. He had an impression that the raft had swung round to the left just before the crew tied up. What was the time? The voyage had been interrupted at sunset: how long ago was that? Running over in his mind the subsequent incidents—the departure of the men, the interval of waiting, the stealthy operations on the raft—he thought the period could hardly exceed two hours and might be less. Thus it was probably between eight and nine o'clock, and he had six or seven hours before dawn-plenty of time to get to Bagdad if he had correctly estimated his position.

But the getting into Bagdad—that was the difficulty. He was to have met the basket-maker within the gate: he was now outside it; and that so disreputable an object as he must at present appear would gain admittance was absurd. That idea must be given up. What then? He reverted to the question that had occurred to him before: would the basket-maker pursue his way to the rendezvous with Yusuf? It was a question impossible to answer. But assuming that the basket-maker did leave the city he would first come southward, then bear away to the south-east. Would it not be as well to set off northward on the chance of meeting or intercepting him? When all the chances were unknown, this was as good as another, and Roger in the end decided to risk it.

The sky was brilliant with stars, and there would be a moon presently. Roger had learnt to read the heavens well enough to set a course, and when he started he faced a little east of north. Walking was toilsome on the heavy ground, but there was plenty of time, he thought, and no need for great exertion. In about a couple of hours his clothes were fairly dry on the outside, though they felt clammy within. He had met nobody, nor passed house or hut.

Presently, however, he struck into a road running almost due north. No doubt it led to the city. The horn of the moon was just appearing above the eastern horizon. Seeing a cluster of low houses ahead, he turned aside to avoid them, and came back to the

road by a long round. Then, knowing that the early morning traffic would soon be starting, he thought it well to leave the road altogether, and trudged away to the right. After some time he crossed a track whose general direction was east and west. Probably this branched from the road, and was the very track along which the basketmaker, if he left the city, might be expected to travel. But Roger's uncertainty prompted him to take risks. Only by coming within sight of the city gate could he ascertain whether the basket-maker actually began his journey. So he turned into the track and walked westward until he reached the road again.

The moon had moved higher up the sky, and by its light he saw the southern outskirts of the city in the distance. Surprised to find himself so much nearer than he had expected, he was half inclined to retreat a little; but espying the ruins of a hut hard by, he betook himself there to rest and await the dawn. Only portions of the round walls remained, but within them he could hope to be secure.

As a precaution he went round the place. The rear abutted on a swamp abundant with osiers. This suggested a means of providing himself with a sort of hat for the morrow, and of fending off the drowsiness which was sure to steal upon him if he remained idle. He cut a good armful of withies, and taking them into the interior, sat down and began to weave, smiling at a recollection of the baskets he had made at his first little school at the age of six, and chuckling at the prospect of passing as a basket-maker's son. His fingers seemed much more clumsy than they had been in his infancy; but he succeeded in fashioning an article that somewhat resembled the reed hats worn by the Chinese.

By the time he had finished his task, he was conscious of an intense thirst, and became aware that the eastern sky gave promise of dawn. He rose, went to a gap in the walls facing north-west, and was delighted to find that he had a direct view of the south gate of the city. It was too far away, however, for him to distinguish objects clearly.

"Rosy-fingered dawn!" The beauty of the epithet had never before revealed itself to him. A blush stole over the greyness; a riband of green edged the horizon; the world was waking. Eagerly he watched the city gate. People came out, at first singly or in twos and threes; then in larger groups. From the side of the road a number of camels rose with ungainly gestures, and moved towards the city: a band of merchants had no doubt encamped there during the night. At the gate it appeared that every one, going in or coming out, was stopped and questioned by the guard. A party of five or six horsemen rode forth; the growing light flickered on spear-heads or lances; they must be Turkish troopers. But there was no sign of a man driving two asses.

Roger kept his eyes fixed on the gate. He felt a sinking at the heart, but hope was not yet quenched. And presently he quivered with eager anticipation, for surely, among a crowd of pedestrians, he had caught sight of a man trudging between two milk-white asses. They drew nearer. The stream of traffic flowed along the main road: none had diverged into the track. Would the ass-driver do so? Roger felt that, if he did not, there was nothing left to live for.

He could have cheered when he saw the slow-moving trio turn off and come towards him. But he had an instinct of caution. No one must see him join the basket-maker. He went to the rear of the hut, and struck

across the plain at an angle with the track, timing his steps so that when the basket-maker overtook him they would be out of sight from the road.

It was perhaps ten minutes later that he came face to face with the basket-maker. While still some distance apart they had seen each other; the old man did not quicken his step or show any sign of interest. When they met, he gave the customary salutation, as he would have done to any wayfarer, but added:

"Have you set your blanket in a wet

place?"

Roger recognised the phrase as one that the dervish had used on meeting Yusuf in the khan. It was evidently a password among Firouz Ali's confederates.

"I am your son Nadan," he said, with a

touch of humour.

But the Arab has no humour: he sees no fun in anything but the crudest of practical jokes. The basket-maker's face remained set in an expression of solemnity that made Roger smile.

The old man touched the animals with

his goad and lengthened his stride.

"Let us haste," he said. "The word was that we should meet near the gate at

dawn. I was there. There I tarried until men began to look upon me with doubt. What is this greybeard that lets the cool hours trickle away? It was no longer safe to linger. Wherefore I set forth, for so was I bidden."

Roger explained his failure to reach the appointed spot in time, but did not think it necessary to relate the whole of his adventure. Anxious to hear whether Yusuf had escaped, he enquired of his companion.

"Allah il Allah! Did you behold a band of horsemen ride forth from the gate a little

before me?"

"Yes: five or six Turkish soldiers."

"They were five, and the first of them was Yusuf."

Roger gaped with astonishment.

"Have they become servants of the Padishah?" he asked.

"Wallahi! Are you a basket-maker? Are you my son Nadan? What son of mine ever crowned his head with that?"

He pointed scornfully to Roger's hat.

"No doubt your skill will make a wonder of it," said Roger, polite for all his impatience. He took off the hat that had cost him so much labour. "Tell me about Yusuf. I am in pain till I hear."

"Ahi! Is a man's head a pumpkin that it should be covered with a basket?" rejoined the imperturbable old man, putting the offending hat under the saddle-cloth of one of the asses. "Peradventure I may get a price for it in some bazar."

He produced from some receptacle within his garments a strip of linen cloth, and wound it as a turban around Roger's

head.

"Now my son will not shame me," he said. "Yusuf! Is he a dog that he should serve the Padishah? Nay, he has put on the raiment of iniquity only for a season. It is as a gin for a woodcock."

"You mean that he and the rest disguised themselves as soldiers? What a clever

trick!"

"Mashallah! The Turks are even as my asses, without understanding; Yusuf is wise as a serpent."

"But how did he escape? How did he

get the uniform?"

"That I know not. Without doubt it is on the head of Firouz Ali."

"We shall meet Yusuf presently and he will tell me," said Roger. Then, breaking into school slang, he chuckled "What a rag!"

They went on without pause. As they proceeded, they crossed other tracks running in various directions over the desert. An hour or two before noon, they halted at a spot where the track they were following forked north-east and south-east, and sat down to a scanty meal of bread, dates, and sour milk carried in the pannier of one of the asses. While they were thus engaged, the old man suddenly lifted his head, and gazed steadily out of his keen eyes at a cloud of dust in the direction of Bagdad.

"By the beard of the Prophet (upon whom be blessing and peace!)," he muttered, "I

see horsemen."

He rapidly glanced over Roger. His inspection appeared to satisfy him. Roger's face was lean, brown and dirty like an Arab's; his clothes, after their wetting, were as foul as a fakir's; his legs, where they could be seen, were caked with dried mud. His nearest friend would hardly have known him.

The horsemen approached rapidly. The two wayfarers could not have concealed themselves on the bare plain if they would. Roger felt no little alarm when in the foremost horseman he recognized the German officer who had bought his horse so cheaply

in Bagdad. It was the very animal he was riding.

The party, about forty in all, galloped up. The officer gave the order to halt, and reined up within a yard of the basket-makers, who rose and gave him courteous salutation.

"Tell me, old man, have you seen five Turkish soldiers on horseback?" he asked in Arabic.

"Why should I, a poor basket-maker, hide anything from the noble effendi?" answered the old man. "In truth I did see five horsemen, but who can say whether they were soldiers?"

"Come, why not? Your eyes are good."

"Mashallah! They are not yet dim; but these horsemen rode like the wind past this spot where we now are, but when we were still far distant, and a cloud of dust enwrapped them, so that I could see neither the fashion of their garments nor whether they carried weapons. And I rejoiced that we did not meet them; for in these times of trouble poor men fear all strangers, except they be in very truth warriors of the Padishah, whom Allah protect!"

"Which way did they ride?" asked the

officer.

"Yonder," replied the man, pointing in the opposite direction to that which Yusuf

had no doubt by this time taken.

"Peace be with you!" said the German. His eye fell on Roger. "That lusty young man ought to be fighting rather than making baskets," he remarked to a Turkish officer by his side.

"That is true, effendi," said the Turk with a shrug. "After this war it will no doubt be possible to bring these Arabs under proper discipline. They have never yet been thoroughly tamed. At present we must accept what aid the Arabs choose to offer."

"Yes, we will see to that after the war. Now, before we ride off tell me something about the country yonder. We cannot talk when we are half-choked with sand."

The keenness with which he questioned the Turk clearly showed that his object in accompanying the troopers was something more considerable than the capture of the fugitive Arabs. When at length they rode off, misled by the basket-maker's information they took a direction quite contrary to the right one.

As soon as they were out of sight the old man, after cursing their backs, their heads, harses, houses and families, said:

"It is high time to be gone. Witless though they are, they will discover ere long that there was deceit on my tongue, and in hot rage will pursue us. Come, let us make speed."

Roger was astonished at the pace of which the asses were capable, and at the extraordinary vigour of the old man, who in spite of the heat strode along as unfalter-

ingly as Roger himself.

After marching for about half an hour they quitted the track and struck off into the desert on their left, towards some low mounds on the horizon. It was heavy going now, and progress seemed to Roger intolerably slow. But the basket-maker allowed no respite. He paused only to let his wellkept animals drink at one of the rare springs that relieved the barrenness of the land. When they had apparently passed the southernmost of the mounds he made a sharp turn at right angles, and entered a dry and silted channel, the remains of an old irrigation canal, that led direct to the mounds. As Roger soon perceived, from the broken columns, cornices, and other architectural fragments half buried in the sand, they were on the site of ancient buildings, dating probably to Babylonian times.

When they had penetrated some little distance within the ruins, a turban showed itself above a half demolished wall ahead. A stalwart form in the dust-coloured uniform of the Turkish soldiery rose into view.

"Yusuf!" Roger ejaculated.

The man came to meet them, gravely, without excitement. Salutations were ex-

changed.

"It is well, Aga," said Yusuf. "May Firouz Ali be blessed in his body and soul, in his coming and going, in his down-sitting and his up-rising. Allah il Allah!"

CHAPTER VII

OUTWITTING THE TURK

Yusuf led the way through a scene of utter desolation to a spot where a wall of sun-dried brick, in good preservation, rose from a heap of rubbish. Inserting his fingers into a crevice in the brickwork he pulled. A portion of the wall slowly opened. It was in reality a wooden door faced with brick so cunningly as to appear a part of the old wall. The passage way now disclosed led into a small courtyard partly covered with debris, partly open to the sky, but screened from external view except one should laboriously climb the smooth perpendicular wall. Here, no doubt, many a time, fugitive Arabs had found refuge from pursuing Turks. Here, now, five horses were nibbling at bundles of hay, and four of Roger's companions of the kafila were reclining in the shade.

The men rose to greet Roger and the basket-maker, who were glad enough to

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throw themselves down and rest, and to partake of the food which their hosts immediately produced from the saddlebags. And then Yusuf related the process of his escape.

Shortly before dawn, a squad of Turkish troopers in charge of an officer had appeared at their prison, bearing an order from the Bey addressed to the governor. It required him to hand over to the escort the five Arab prisoners who had recently been entrusted to him. The governor, awakened from sleep, was no doubt too drowsy to examine the signature of the order; but even if he had done so, he would hardly have been suspicious, for the forgery had been very cleverly done. The receipt of such an order at such a time was in no way unusual. Many a prisoner, supposed to be awaiting trial, had been thus fetched away, never to be seen again. At any rate, the governor had evidently obeyed his instructions without question, for while the night was yet black the five Arabs were taken from their fetid rat-infested cell and delivered to the escort.

By them they were led to a deserted house in a secluded quarter of the city. There in the courtyard they exchanged their garments for soldiers' uniforms, appropriated lances and pistols, mounted the horses (unhappily not their own), and being furnished with the password, rode out of the city without question at the first opening of the gates.

The audacity of it pleased Roger's adventurous soul; but he could not help reflecting on the singularly inefficient organization which rendered such schemes feasible. And he felt a new admiration for the cleverness of Firouz Ali.

When Yusuf had told his story, he went on to explain his plan for reaching the stronghold of his chief. This, it may here be remarked, lay in the hills rather more than a hundred miles east of Bagdad, but was usually approached and left by a devious route, because Asker was on bad terms with the tribes on his west, who were working, more or less honestly, with the Turks. Yusuf proposed to remain in hiding during the day-time, and travel only by night. Three nights' hard riding should bring them to the borders of their own country, if they took the risk of encountering Shammars or other hostile tribes. They would avoid the more frequented tracks, and at first, while still on the open desert, go a little northward of the direct course, but swing round

to the south-east when they reached the

rugged highlands of the Pushti Kuh.

The difficulty was, to provide a mound for Roger. Yusuf bitterly deplored the loss of the fine horses with which he had entered Bagdad. He had not dared to bring a spare horse with him, for fear of exciting remark. He looked at the basket-maker's asses. They were good beasts, with endurance for a long and leisurely journey, but not equal to the speed at which the party ought to travel in the likelihood of their being pursued. Still, there was no choice in the matter. It was one of the asses or nothing, and the basket-maker indicated the one that was capable of the best pace.

Then began a contest between Arab courtesy and British firmness. Yusuf and each member of the party in turn urged that Roger should take his horse: he would be content with the ass. Roger exhausted his stock of polite phrases in declining their offers, which were renewed and renewed again. He sometimes wished that English bluffness were possible in his intercourse with the Arabs; but knowing that brusquerie would not be understood and might give mortal offence, he was always careful to

meet courtesy with courtesy.

At length the matter was settled-after all, in the British way, by a compromise. It was agreed that Roger should ride the ass for a part of each night, and exchange steeds with Yusuf for the remainder. Since Yusuf's horse was obviously the best of the animals, Roger was happy in the prospect of a few hours' real riding every night.

In the course of conversation, the basketmaker mentioned the troop of cavalry under the German officer whom he had sent on a

wild-goose chase.

"Mashallah! That was well done," cried Yusuf. "But by my father's eyes you must needs walk warily hereafter, friend. The Turks will flay you if they light on you, and it is told me that the German kafirs are as cruel as the Turks."

A year or two before, Roger would have protested vigorously at this statement; but previously to Turkey's entrance into the war, when news from home was still procurable, he had learnt with horrified amazement what had happened in Belgium. It seemed incredible. He had known a German at school, "quite a decent chap," as he put it; and the boy's parents, whom he had met once at the school sports, had struck him as kind and cultivated people. Could

these horrible crimes in Belgium have been committed by fellow-countrymen of theirs? But it was equally difficult to understand how the Turks who massacred and tortured Armenians and Arabs could belong to the same race as those simple, kindly, hospitable Turks whom he had sometimes met in his father's company. To reconcile these opposites was beyond him: "We're all a rummy mixture," he said to himself.

The basket-maker was unmoved by Yusuf's remark.

"Allah is good!" he said. "When you have departed, I will go to my own little village and grow melons. Bagdad shall know my baskets no more for a while."

The news that soldiers were already out searching for him caused Yusuf to post a look-out at a spot convenient for scanning the desert in all directions. During the afternoon each member of the party took his turn as sentry. The rest slept.

It wanted rather more than an hour of sunset when the look-out of the moment reported a body of twelve horsemen approaching from the south. The Arabs instantly arose, and stood by their horses' heads. Yusuf went to the side of the look-out. At first it was impossible to dis-

tinguish the riders through the cloud of dust raised by the horses' hoofs; but presently Yusuf announced that they were Turkish troopers, led by the German officer. The inference was that the larger party seen earlier in the day had separated into smaller bands, with the object of hunting in different directions.

Yusuf and his man returned within the security of the wall, and watched the horsemen through a very narrow slit made in the door for that purpose. The troopers rode straight towards the mounds, checked their horses to a walking pace, and entered the area of the ruins, casting about for the fugitives. The soft and shifting sand, however, gave no distinct hoof-prints. Roger, crouching down and peering through the lower part of the slit, tingled at the sight of the German on the back of the commandeered horse. Schechter Pasha looked very hot, tired, and ill-tempered.

They drew rein within a few yards of the disguised door, and their conversation was

clearly audible within the wall.

"Will not the noble effendi return now to the city?" suggested the Turkish lieutenant. "The day is far spent. Night will overtake us before we reach the gates. And in truth this hunting of pigs is no fit work for your excellency."

"I wish they were pigs!" growled the German. "We shall not return yet. They must be hiding somewhere close at hand."

"Far be it from me to dispute your excellency's opinion; yet it is possible that the wretches, knowing the need of haste, would outstrip the wind in fleeing to their own people. Why then should they hide?"

"You still believe that they set out to

return to their chief?"

"Can one doubt it, effendi? It is clear as the day that they came to the city, not to sell horses, but to escort that young Russian of whom the mullah reported."

"Yes, and the mullah was an idiot. He insisted on watching that barber's shop, though I was sure that Firouz Ali, who had shaved me regularly since I came to Bagdad, is perfectly harmless. And then he was crazy enough to attempt to deal with the Russian single-handed. What is the result? He was drowned. Luckily the Russian was drowned also. But we must catch those Arabs, if only to teach a lesson to their kind. Besides, it is not the custom of us Germans to abandon a task when half done. And furthermore, if the Arabs have indeed

escaped, we cannot fail to find somewhere on the desert that lying basket-maker. He shall be shot, and his son too; for if we made a soldier of the young villain, he would either desert at the first opportunity or stir up disaffection among the men."

"As your excellency pleases," said the

Turk resignedly.

At his command the troopers scattered, riding in and out among the ruins and the sand-heaps. Without orders from Yusuf, the Arabs had covered their horses' heads to prevent their whinnying. The German looked at the wall, and seemed to ponder the possibility of its concealing a hiding-place; but there was apparently no entrance in it; its extremities were silted up; and he seemed to be satisfied that search there would be a waste of labour. When the men returned from their unsuccessful tour about the ruins, therefore, he ordered them to follow him towards another heap of mounds in the distance, saying that there would be time to investigate them before sunset.

Yusuf cursed their backs as they rode off. Hoping that the last had been seen of them, the fugitives settled down again, to wait for the darkness. But the sun's red disc was still half above the horizon when the party came riding back, and, to the chagrin of the Arabs, dismounted and prepared to bivouac for the night. The spot they chose was a hollow about a third of a mile away, where they would be sheltered from the sandladen wind that sometimes, after dark, blew across the desert. But it was near enough to make it difficult and hazardous for the fugitives to steal away undetected. In the still night air their movements might well be heard.

But Yusuf was determined to make the attempt. His party had very little food, either for themselves or for the horses, and their water-skins were already nearly empty. To remain a night and another day where they were would mean discomfort not far short of torture. Accordingly, in the early part of the night, when all was quiet in the enemy's bivouac, the band of six passed silently out of the courtyard, closed the door behind them, and slowly threaded their way through the ruins in the opposite direction, leading their horses.

It was before the rising of the moon, and the light from the glittering legions of the sky was not sufficient to give them much help while they were still within the ruins. Indeed, the mischance that occurred was directly due to the absence of light. In spite of all their care they had gone barely half a mile when the horse of one of them displaced a block of stone on the top of a heap of rubbish, and in the miniature landslide that followed it fell with resounding crash upon another stone below. Instantly the Arabs and Roger sprang to their saddles, the latter mounting the ass. Already they heard shouts from the bivouac behind them. So strange a noise stabbing the silence of the night in such a spot would draw the Turks hot-foot to discover its cause. And then, though the fugitives had traversed the ruins unperceived, their forms could not fail to be seen as they emerged into the open desert. They must ride on, trusting to speed and the chapter of accidents.

Only a few minutes had passed when they heard the enemy in full pursuit. Roger was not too much excited to weigh the chances. The soldiers had the better horses; on the other hand they had been riding almost all day, while the Arabs' beasts, though inferior, were fresher. But the pursuers had the advantage in numbers, and so could afford to take greater risks of a spill. If one or more of them should drop

out, it would matter little; but Yusuf would never consent to leave any member of his party to fall into the Turks' hands. A greater disadvantage to the fugitives was the fact that Roger rode an ass. The pace of all must be accommodated to his, and though he had experience of the animal's capabilities, he ruefully owned that it must come far short of the horses in speed.

There was one respect, however, in which the Turks were quite outmatched by the Arabs. The latter knew the desert intimately. It was, in a sense, their native land. In it they were born, bred, and buried. Many a time they had had to ride for their lives across its trackless wastes. The Arabs of the borderlands were enemies of Turks, Persians, and one another by turns. Yusuf would have told you that he knew the desert as he knew the palm of his hand. It was he that led the way now, unerringly through the dark.

Suiting his pace to that of the mettlesome ass that followed him, he rode for a mile or more in as straight a line as though he saw a mark in front of him. At a trot or canter, walk or gallop as the nature of the ground required, he held steadily to his settled course, not disturbed by the sounds of pur-



THE NIGHT-RIDERS.

110 OUTWITTING THE TURK

suit drawing ever nearer. At last he halted, turned in the saddle, and murmured an order to his four Arab comrades. They dismounted. One of them brought his horse to Roger, who at Yusuf's word got off his ass, and mounted the horse instead. Then the four men walked their steeds into a dry water-course just beyond the spot where they had halted, and began quietly to lead them up-stream. It was the old channel of the Diyalah, which flows into the Tigris some miles below Bagdad.

Meanwhile Yusuf and Roger pushed straight on. Yusuf turned his head sideways, intently listening. He heard the pursuers halt at the channel. The four men in it halted also. As Yusuf had intended, the enemy heard the thuds of the two galloping horses as their hoofs struck the soil, here a little less sandy, and resumed the chase.

CHAPTER VIII

1

SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNTS

REJOICING in his new mount, Roger rode stride for stride with his companion. He placed implicit trust in Yusuf. Though ignorant of his plan, he felt sure that it was such that neither his own safety nor that of the other members of the party had been jeopardized. Yet it seemed to him strange that Yusuf and he were apparently leaving a great deal to chance.

Yusuf urged his horse to its utmost speed, and rode on until the sounds of pursuit could no longer be heard. Then he pulled up, dismounted, and bidding Roger do likewise, struck off at a wide angle from their previous direction, leading his horse at a rapid walk. In a few minutes they heard the enemy thundering past behind them. When the sounds had died away, they remounted, and rode on in their new course.

Meanwhile their four companions had hurried along as fast as the rough bed of the channel allowed. Sunk, as it was, slightly below the level of the desert, the sounds of the horses moving in it did not carry far. In about half an hour they halted, and waited for the return of their leader. To the Arab time is nothing. These men would have remained at the same spot for hours without any fear for Yusuf's safety, such was their confidence in him. They knew that he would come to them at his discretion. Only when they heard faint sounds up stream did they show any symptom of uneasiness. It was from down stream they expected Yusuf to rejoin them. They urged their horses up the bank, and waited tensely. Then there came to their ears a low call, giving the watchword of their tribe. The doubt was gone. They moved slowly forward and met Yusuf and Roger.

These two had ridden northward far enough to make sure that, when they hit the water-course, they were above and not

below their friends.

Roger expressed his admiration of Yusuf's stratagem.

"Allah ho Akbar! God is great!" was the Arab's reply. "And my thoughts run very swiftly."

Having, for the time at least, completely

shaken off their pursuers, the fugitives continued their flight at a pace that would not overtax the horses and the ass. In due time they arrived at the Diyalah, dawdling along in its new course to the Tigris. Here they stopped to allow the animals to drink, and to replenish their water-skins. On the journey before them they might need all the water they could carry. Then they found a ford and crossed.

The moon was now rising; but confident that they had thrown the enemy off the scent they welcomed the light. This part of the country was but sparsely populated; they were far from the regular caravan route between Bagdad and Persia; and if they should meet wandering Arabs of another tribe, or, unlikely contingency, pass an encampment, their uniform of Turkish soldiers would protect them from awkward questions. The local Arabs, although nominally allied with the Turks, fought shy of them. The presence of Turkish soldiery implied requisitions, and the Arab is not singular in his dislike of forced sales among other forms of taxation.

They continued their journey until dawn, then halted for a necessary rest and a sparing meal. Consulting his fellow Arabs, Yusuf

114 SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNTS

came to the conclusion that, with altered circumstances, his plan of hiding by day and travelling by night must be abandoned. It would have been a good plan if they had been able to escape from the ruins undetected; but now that the Turks knew that they were somewhere in this region of the desert, they would put the Arab tribes on their track. For this reason safety lay in making the best speed they could, before the hue and cry set innumerable parties to hunt them down.

At this season of the year the country through which they passed was parched and devoid of vegetation. In the rainy season a vast alluvial plain, it was now an arid waste, broken here and there by a small Arab village surrounded by palm trees and by gardens irrigated by means of watercourses derived from the Diyalah. These settlements the travellers avoided, though in the middle of the day they would have been glad to seek shade beneath the trees from the burning rays of the sun. They found a scanty shelter under the high banks of the numerous ancient canals, now and since long past waterless, which crossed their track.

For two days and nights they marched uneventfully, eking out their provisions,

making stealthy approaches to the infrequent streams, and taking only such repose as was absolutely necessary to save their animals from exhaustion. They were already approaching the low crumbling sandstone hills between them and the higher rocky ranges in one of which Asker had his stronghold.

It was early morning. Another four or five hours should bring them into a district so broken and so well known to them that they could there laugh at pursuers. The ground was already rough and stony, broken by hillocks with precipitous and unfirm sides. On gaining the top of a long gradual slope they suffered two shocks of surprise. Far away to the left, in the north and north-east, they discovered the presence of a large body of troops—an army, indeed: infantry, cavalry, and convoys of camels and mules. This was sufficiently disconcerting. But there was a more imminent danger. Approaching them from the south, heading them off from the hills, a small party of horsemen was riding at full speed across the undulating country between the high ground and the level plain.

Yusuf shaded his eyes with his hand and keenly watched the galloping horsemen.

116 SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNTS

"Allah!" he cried after a few moments.
"By my father's beard they are those
Turkish dogs, with the German kafir at
their head. What evil fate has thrown
them upon our tracks?"

It was the first time that Roger had perceived any sign of perturbation in his Arab friend. He did not know that Yusuf was uneasy only on his account. The Arabs, if unencumbered, could no doubt have made good with ease their escape into the trackless hills; but they could not be disloyal to their traditional hospitality. Yusuf looked upon Roger as his guest, to be protected even at his own cost. And at this moment Roger was riding the ass, which had stood the journey wonderfully well, but was perhaps incapable of the turn of speed now required.

Yusuf swiftly calculated the chances. The rocky defile towards which he was going was about five miles ahead. He was probably-nearer by half a mile to its entrance than the Turks. But he had a further advantage over them in that his party was following a defined track, while the pursuers were riding over broken country, and before they should reach the defile, must cross a tract strewn with boulders and jagged frag-

ments of rock. It seemed possible to reach the goal first.

The Arabs had not checked their pace while Yusuf made these calculations. They pushed on with all speed, and for a time drew away from the enemy. Of these some were seen to fall; the hunt became strung out, the better mounted or more reckless leaving the others behind. Three horsemen soon took a long lead of the field; and of these three, one greatly outstripped the other two. Roger, though his vision was not so keen as Yusuf's, had no difficulty in recognizing the German officer—the Schechter Pasha to whom he owed a grudge for commandeering his horse.

It was now clear beyond question that the party must be overtaken by the three foremost pursuers, nay, by them all, long before the defile was gained—unless the ass was abandoned.

"Dismount, Aga," cried Yusuf to Roger, riding close beside him, "and take my horse."

"No; though I thank you," replied

Roger.

"Then mount behind me: even with two riders my horse would outstrip the ass."

118 SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNTS

"No; I am too heavy. The beast would be overburdened, and we should both be lost. Never mind me: ride on; I'll do the best I can, and if I'm caught—well, the Turks will have one more prisoner of war."

He said this to satisfy Yusuf, knowing well that he would be treated, not as a prisoner of war, but as a spy. Yusuf, however, was not to be tempted. Neither he nor any of his men would save themselves at Roger's expense. They rode on.

The distance between the leading enemy horseman and the rest increased moment by moment. Roger shouted a suggestion to Yusuf. The Arab started, glanced round at the pursuers, and shook his head.

"But it is worth trying," pleaded Roger,

"and there is no time to lose."

Yusuf called to the Arab nearest him. asking his opinion of Roger's suggestion-a sure sign that he was himself wavering: he never consulted any one when his own mind was made up.

"By my eyes, it is very good," the man

responded.

"Mashallah!" ejaculated Yusuf.

He handed his pistol to Roger, then ordered the rest to follow him and push forward at full speed, leaving Roger and the

ass apparently to be overtaken by the enemy. Roger did not slacken his pace; to the pursuers he would still seem to be making his best effort to escape. Every now and again he glanced round at the German, who was rapidly closing in upon him. When the distance between them had diminished to about two hundred yards, he turned off the track and rode away to the left for a hundred yards or so, then slipped from his saddle, and posted himself, pistol in hand, behind the ass.

The German reined up. He appeared undecided what to do, not from any fear of tackling this audacious youth, pistol and all, but, as his actions showed, because he was determined to bag the whole party. His hesitation lasted only a moment. Then, shouting back to the nearest of his men, still two or three hundred yards away, to follow him, he galloped along the track in pursuit of Yusuf and the rest. He had concluded, no doubt, that the solitary assrider would fall an easy prey to the worse-mounted of his troopers coming up behind.

He was just passing opposite the spot where Roger stood when the latter gave a piercing whistle. The German's horse stopped almost dead in his tracks, with so violent a shock that the rider was flung over his head. A second whistle brought the horse, whinnying with pleasure, to Roger's side. In a trice Roger was in the saddle. With a glance at the German, who lay apparently senseless where he had fallen, he rode back to the track and pushed on at a hard canter after his companions, leading the ass by the bridle. "They shan't capture even a donkey if I can help it," he thought.

Though it was some minutes before he realized it, the danger was over. The Turkish lieutenant did not love the German, who was alternately dictatorial and condescending. The troopers were thoroughly weary of hunting the desert day after day, and felt a certain pleasure in the disappointment of the officer who had worked them so unmercifully. When they saw him fall, instead of carrying on the pursuit still more vigorously, as was their bounden duty, they halted by the prostrate officer, dismounted. and began to discuss among themselves whether he was dead or alive, with a hopeful bias towards the former alternative. By and by it occurred to the lieutenant that he might discover the truth by means of a slight examination. When he announced that the Pasha lived there were no shouts of "Mashallah!" or "Barikallah!" or any other of the pious ejaculations by which Musulmans express thankfulness and praise. Only when the German at last opened his eyes and groaned did a diplomatic "Mashallah!" burst from their lips.

Schechter Pasha could not speak until he was restored by drops from the flask he carried in his pocket. Then he demanded whether the fugitives were caught. The tenor of his remarks when he learnt the truth, by instalments, it is unnecessary to describe. Suffice it to say that the more he groaned, afterwards, as he was lifted on to one of the troopers' horses, the more fervent were the exclamations of "Mashallah!" that the Turks whispered in their secret soul.

Meanwhile Roger had rejoined his friends, joyous with a double satisfaction. He had regained his horse—at the expense of the German.

"Did I not do well to teach Majnoun to come at my call?" he asked Yusuf exultantly. "The hours I spent were not wasted, you see."

"By the beard of the Prophet (upon whom be blessing and peace!) the reward

122 SCHECHTER PASHA DISMOUNTS

of your labours is sweeter than honey. But I have a matter to say, Aga. We lament and are sorry because you are not an Arab."

"But why?"

"Because we feel in our souls that one who could devise so cunning a trick, in the twinkling of an eye, would bring praise and renown upon our race."

"That's very nice of you," said Roger, taking the compliment as a specimen of Oriental exaggeration. But Yusuf meant

exactly what he said.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAVE IN THE HILLS

Yusur and his party had halted just within the entrance to the defile, and awaited there the issue of Roger's stratagem. Having seen with their own eyes how completely it succeeded, they felt easy in mind. Among their own rocky fastnesses a few hill Arabs. without much presumption, regarded themselves as a match for many times their number of Osmanli, or any other plainsmen. They made therefore a leisurely advance through the defile: indeed, their horses were too much exhausted for rapid marching; and since it was nearly noon when they reached the further end, they dismounted and, after giving the animals the last of the fodder and water, lay down under the shade of a hollowed-out rock to eat the remains of their food and rest until the heat of the day was past. In this their own country they would be able to procure supplies for the last stage of their journey without difficulty. 123

124 THE CAVE IN THE HILLS

They talked over their adventures since leaving Bagdad.

"Mashallah!" cried one. "Are we not worthy of praise seeing that we have defied the armies of the Padishah?"

"Of a truth we have discomfited a great host," said another ."What dull-witted dog of a Turk is equal to the sharp-edged cunning of us sons of the hills?"

"It is a tale of great glory that we shall tell our master Asker," said Yusuf.

And so they went on, heaping scorn on the enemy and praise on themselves with childlike simplicity. It was not surprising, perhaps excusable, that they were confirmed in their traditional contempt of the stupidity of the Turk; but their talk was more boastful than Roger, with his British habit of mind, found congenial. They appeared to have forgotten, though he had not, the large force of all arms which they had seen far away to the north-east almost at the same moment as they had espied their pursuers in the opposite direction.

Firouz Ali had told him, he remembered, that the Turkish force assembled to the north-east of Bagdad intended to punish Asker on its way to deal with the Russians operating in Persia. Ignorant of the general

course of the war, except for rumours which he dismissed as unreliable, he knew that his own countrymen had suffered a disaster at Kut-el-Amara, and could not help inferring that the situation in the East, at any rate, was far from satisfactory. It was well that he did not know all. The Russians in Persia and on the Turco-Persian border had had to fall back. Their advance in Armenia had been checked: the movement that resulted in the capture of Erzingan had not yet begun. And so far from joining hands with the British and making a triumphant progress to Bagdad, they had done nothing since the time when a small force of Cossacks, after an adventurous ride, linked up with the troops at a standstill on the Tigris.

The journey was resumed in the afternoon. It was a country of crags and ravines, sandstone hills and rushing streams, deep fertile valleys set in the midst of mountains sparsely covered with dwarf oaks. On second thoughts Yusuf had determined to keep to the hills, and not descend to the valleys for the purpose of obtaining food at the villages. They could get all the water they wanted from the streams, and manage without food until nightfall, when they

should arrive at Asker's stronghold. It was just as well that the Turkish uniform should not be seen in this region: some indiscreet person might innocently give information to the enemy. So they rode on slowly over the rough and stony hill tracks.

Towards evening the complacency of the Arabs received a rude shock. They caught sight of a horseman riding very slowly towards them. Long before Roger could distinguish his features Yusuf declared that it was Saleh, one of his tribe. When he came within hailing distance Yusuf asked for news, and was surprised to get only a faint response. The explanation was disclosed in a few minutes. Both man and horse were wounded.

"Wallahi! What is this?" cried Yusuf. "With whom have you fought? Is it well with the chief? Say on, Saleh, for my heart is large within me."

Saleh related a surprising story. On the previous evening a large force of Turkish irregular cavalry, consisting principally of Kurds, had swooped down on Asker's territory from the north-east. Warned by Firouz Ali's messenger of an attack impending from the west—by the force moving from Bagdad—he was unprepared for an enemy from the

direction of Kirmanshah. He had been taken by surprise, cut off from his stronghold, and was now a fugitive across the Persian frontier.

"Wallahi! This is ill news you bring," said Yusuf. "And how got you your wounds?"

It was during the pursuit of the chief, among a small rearguard that skirmished with the Kurds. Unable to follow Asker, Saleh had escaped capture by hiding through the night, and was now on his way to seek a refuge with the Beni Lam tribe—a doubtful sanctuary, but the nearest to one who was incapacitated by his wounds and unable to ride far. His wounded horse could not carry him after his chief into Persia; nor could a man venture alone on such a journey, the intervening tribes being dangerous to small parties, and certainly hostile to strangers.

"Wallahi!" Yusuf repeated. "You are indeed a bearer of bad tidings. What fate mocks us? What bird of darkness spreads its evil wing over us? Can it be true that our stronghold, the fortress of our master Asker (whom God defend!), is fallen

to the ravening wolves?"

[&]quot;Nay, the wolves have not yet climbed

into the sheepfold. There remain a score of warriors, and the chief's women, and some few children. They have food and water in plenty, and, Inshallah! will abide in safety until the chief returns."

"That is little profit to us. We have no food; we are very weary from our long journeying and our deeds of great daring. Have we escaped from our manifold tribulations to perish here miserably? Come, let us find some secret place where we may take counsel together."

They guitted the track, and after some trouble discovered a secluded hollow large enough to shelter themselves and the animals. Here they squatted on the rocks, still warm from the sun's rays, and proceeded to hold their council.

Any one who was unfamiliar with the ways of the Arabs might have wondered that the chief should have left his family to the poor defence of a handful of his warriors. It was the custom, however, as Roger knew, for such petty chiefs, when hard pressed, to take refuge in flight with the greater part of their armed dependents, leaving their strongholds, deemed impregnable, to be held by a small garrison. Sooner or later the enemy were forced to withdraw for want of

THE CAVE IN THE HILLS 129

subsistence in the barren hills. Then the fugitives returned. This, no doubt, was the course followed by Asker in the present emergency.

It did not commend itself to Roger. It seemed to him unnatural and unchivalrous to leave the women and children and the paltry band of defenders to their fate. In the past it might perhaps have been the wisest course. No doubt it was quite well adapted to the inter-tribal raids, even to the half-hearted and ill-organized expeditions undertaken against the border tribes by the lieutenants of the Padishah in Bagdad. But Roger felt that the chief in relying upon this immemorial device might now be leaning on a rotten reed. The present war was being conducted on a scale and, largely through the co-operation of German advisers, with an energy and thoroughness to which Turkish history showed no parallel since the days when the Ottomans first overran the Byzantine empire. If the enemy had raided this remote hill region, it must be because they had a clear strategic motive. They would not dissipate their strength in mere punitive efforts against a petty chief whose resources could make little difference to either side.

130 THE CAVE IN THE HILLS

While the Arabs were talking at large and not at all to the point, Roger tried to visualize the situation. In spite of his youth, he had—as became a public schoolboy and the son of his father—a larger outlook than his hosts, who seemed to think. somewhat to his amusement, that the Turks were doing them the compliment of waging war with them. What could be the purpose of the Turks' movement against Asker? Surely it was to interpose a barrier between the Russian and the British armies. The achievement of the Cossacks in penetrating to the British lines had no doubt awakened the Turco-Germans to the danger that would spring from a concentration of an allied force on the Persian border, and the development of a vast flanking movement that would turn all their positions on the Tigris. The capture of Asker's stronghold would give them a valuable strategic point d'appui.

Roger did not mention these considerations to his companions. The Arabs generally had so completely lost touch with warfare on the large scale that they would not understand the points involved, simple as

they were.

His dislike of the chief's course of action was enhanced by a piece of information

given by Saleh as a matter of special interest to him. Two days before, the man said, a body of Indian cavalry, commanded by one of Roger's fellow-countrymen, had passed eastward. They had come from the Tigris, and expected to return in the course of a few days. The impression they had left with the tribe was that they were going to meet the Russians. There was little doubt that they would now be cut off. The only practicable road back was in the possession of the Turks.

This piece of news, coupled with his chivalrous feeling towards the abandoned family, accounted for the line he took, when a lull in the aimless and windy discussion among the Arabs gave him an opportunity of making a suggestion. He was by temperament cautious and reflective, though quick to decide and to act when action was demanded. Further, he had plenty of tact, and a graciousness of manner that won friends everywhere. He saw that the plight of the Indian cavalry would not stir any generous feeling among the Arabs, and resolved to say nothing about it. But it held a large place in his mind when he put his suggestion to them. He could not bring himself to ride away and leave Indian

troopers under a British officer to be cut up by Turks and Kurds; though what he could do to help them or warn them he was quite at a loss to see.

At the moment of his intervention in the discussion the company had come back to the point at which they had started. None of them had any idea beyond making the best of their way across the hills to rejoin their chief.

"I have listened to your talk," he said, "and there is much wisdom in what you say. Who am I, a mere youth, to speak a word among my elders, who were grown men before I was born?"

"Nay, Aga," said Yusuf politely, "there is honey on your tongue. It is a joy to us to hear our speech from the lips of the son of a wise father. When you speak, it is as when flowers receive the dew of heaven."

Roger smiled: he found his resources of imagery incapable of furnishing words to acknowledge this compliment; but his smile was a priceless asset.

"Then let me speak a little," he said, "and consider my words in your wisdom. The chief has gone on a far journey: do we know how far? He is accompanied by four or five hundred men: we are only seven.

The tribes through which he passes would fear to molest him, so numerous are his warriors, so great is his fame. But would they allow us to pass in peace? What is the fate of small parties among these arrant freebooters?"

"Ahi! By my father's eyes, that is a weighty matter," said Yusuf, pulling his beard. "But we talked of that, and it is better to fall by the sword than to perish of hunger."

"Shall we perish? Is there no safety for us, and also good work to our hand? Look now at this. If we remain in this region, may we not perhaps help those few men that guard the women? And as for perishing of hunger, why should we do that? You wear the garments of the Padishah's soldiers, and wish to avoid the villages. But here am I, a poor basket-maker; what should hinder me from going down and buying food for you and fodder for the cattle?"

"That is true," murmured several voices.

"But tell me, Aga," said Yusuf, "what should we do, and by what means should we bring help to our people? It is the word of Saleh that the Turks (whom Allah destroy!) compass the place about, so that there is no coming out nor going in."

134 THE CAVE IN THE HILLS

"I know not now how we can help them. But at least we can learn what the enemy is doing. Who knows like you how stupid the Turks are? Who knows but that your wit, so well proved this day, may triumph over them again and bring to nought all their evil devices?"

"Allah! This is good counsel, friends," said Yusuf. "The wit of one of us is equal to a host of those dogs. Let us do even as the Aga says. Did I not say that he was worthy to bring praise and renown upon our race?"

CHAPTER X

AN ARABIAN TALE

The spot in which the Arab party held its little conference was about eleven miles distant from the chief's hill-fort. If Roger's idea of reconnoitring the position was to be put into practice, they must find some nearer place which would provide safe quarters. There would be no security in the small villages that existed here and there in the valleys. Under pressure from the Turks, the fidelity of the inhabitants could not be relied on. Perhaps, indeed, the proximity of a large armed force had already scared away Asker's nearest neighbours.

But in this rocky land there were caves, in times long past used as dwellings, as was proved by the carvings on the walls. Yusuf knew of one such cave some four or five miles from the stronghold. It lay remote from any frequented track, and according to the traditions of the tribe had often given refuge to their ancestors in time of

trouble. To this he led the way by devious routes. It was a vast chamber in the rock, spacious enough to shelter a much larger party than that which now sought asylum there. They found that they had been anticipated by seven other refugees, who, having lost touch with the main body of the fugitive tribesmen, and being afraid of wandering by themselves deeper into Luristan, had resorted there to wait for the trouble to end. A hill stream ran close by; and being, like all the Arabs of this region, expert thieves, they were in no anxiety about the prospect of obtaining sufficient food from the gardens and orchards of the valley hamlets.

Mutual explanations passed between them and the new arrivals. They had no fresh information to give. Having fled at the approach of the Turkish force, they knew nothing of what had happened afterwards.

It was arranged that while Yusuf and Roger went in one direction to reconnoitre the stronghold from the nearest accessible spot, others should go independently to see what the enemy was doing on the outskirts. Accordingly, when night was well advanced, the two parties set off severally on foot.

Asker's stronghold, or diz, as it was

called, was a remarkable natural fortress. From the centre of a vast saucer-like depression—once the bed of a lake—a huge flat-topped rock rose to the height of more than a hundred feet. The sides at its base formed steep slopes; but some sixty feet from the bottom, at the point where the surface of the water had once been almost level with the edge of the basin, the walls were perpendicular. The summit was many acres in extent, covered for the most part with arable soil that yielded wheat and other crops, and provided pasture for a small flock of sheep and goats. The habitable part of the fortress was a large platform, twenty or thirty feet below the top. Here were a few huts built of roughly-hewn stones. At one end of it bubbled a perennial spring, and large reservoirs, of ancient date, cut in the rock, collected rain-water. The platform was reached from the base by dint of scrambling up the slope with the aid of ropes; ladders and ropes were the means of access from the platform to the top.

Roger knew the place well. It was there that Mr. Burnet had spent his last days. The Arabs believed the diz to be impregnable, and no doubt a handful of resolute men could hold it with ease against the

mountain tribesmen, ill-disciplined and imperfectly equipped, or even against a disciplined force armed only with rifles. But that it could long withstand attack by modern artillery seemed doubtful in the extreme.

It was by no means an easy matter for Roger and his companion to reach a point at which the stronghold and its surroundings could be viewed without discovery by the troops presumably now investing it. The surrounding hills were very precipitous; their near faces fell away into undulating ground that was bounded by remoter and higher hills. The basin from which the rock sprang was so extensive that in the darkness the fortress would be hardly visible.

On the north-west and south-west the continuity of the hills was broken by defiles forming the entrance and exit of the stream that once fed the lake. In ancient times a barrage had been constructed at the north-western defile—the exit—and Mr. Burnet had discovered that a conduit running through the hill some distance east of the barrage had served to irrigate a large tract of country to the south. This conduit was now blocked by a landslide on the side towards the lake; the southern end still existed, forming a wide

passage that extended a long way through the hill. Mr. Burnet, anxious to discover how much of the tunnel at the lake end was blocked, had for the only time in his life bemoaned his lack of mathematics. But when Roger arrived to join him, the difficulty vanished. By trigonometrical calculation Roger proved that the blocked portion could not exceed fifty or sixty feet in length. One of his father's cherished plans was to reconstruct the barrage, re-open the conduit, and thus restore the old system of irrigation.

It was not till the verge of dawn that Yusuf and Roger, after a toilsome march, climbing up hill and down dale, and at the end much scaling of crags, were safely ensconced in a niche in the hill to the southeast of the rock. They had come only about four miles from the cave as the crow flies. The summit of the diz was slightly higher than the point at which they were posted, so that when dawn broke they were unable to see what was going on there. The platform, which was almost level with them, showed no signs of life. But they could scan every part of the vast basin, except that portion actually screened by the fortress, and this included the entrance to the defile by which the stream entered.

Just within the old barrage there was a large bivouac of cavalry, and they inferred, from the sounds that reached them now and then from the north-west, that there was also a strong force in the neighbourhood of the defile. It was pretty clear that the enemy had taken measures to block both exits from the basin.

"Wallahi!" Yusuf ejaculated. "They will soon weary of that. Where will they get themselves food?"

"You may be sure they have come well provided," replied Roger. "And they have all the region round about to levy on."

"But there is food on the diz for three or four months. Are they so stout of soul that they will abide here so long?"

"See! There is your answer."

A working party had appeared from the direction of the defile and was making its way to a patch of woodland near the southern edge of the basin. Yusuf watched them narrowly. As they reached the wood he uttered an exclamation, for he saw now for the first time that a number of trees had already been felled.

"What is their intent, Aga? Do they need fires at this season?"

"I suspect they are making scaling ladders.

They do not intend to remain idle here. We shall soon see."

Though the distance was too great for them to distinguish the details of the work on which the men were occupied, Roger had no doubt that he was right.

Soon afterwards another party marched from the direction of the barrage and continued work also begun previously on the hillside to the left of the watchers. Here the landslide that at some remote period had blocked the conduit had formed a broad-topped mound rising forty or fifty feet above the level of the basin. Its sloping side was steep and strewn with boulders; but it was practicable, and the working party was apparently engaged in cutting a road up the slope to the summit of the mound. No other evidence was required to prove that the operations were not exclusively in Turkish hands.

Every now and again came the crackle of rifle-fire from the invisible side of the basin. Roger guessed that the enemy were sniping the garrison of the rock. So far as he could tell no reply was made: probably ammunition was not too plentiful with the defenders, and they would reserve what they had until the assailants came to much closer grips.

While the two men were watching, a train of camels appeared from behind the rock in the direction of the defile and crossed the basin towards the mound.

"They carry food," cried Yusuf.

"Worse than that!" said Roger, "You see those greenish-grey things on the backs of the first two camels? They are mountain guns. And the loads of the other camels are without doubt ammunition. They are going to throw shells on the diz from the top of the mound yonder."

"Wallahi! What is this I hear? Shells!

Are they monkeys?"

"The shells I mean are large cartridges, containing stuff that explodes with a great noise and shatters rock into fragments. One shell may kill a dozen men."

The Arab looked incredulous, then alarmed. He was quite ignorant of the triumphs of modern civilization. But his face cleared.

"If it be so, what matters it? There are caves and secret places on the diz where our people can take refuge. And verily these dogs of Turks would need shells in number as the stars to destroy that vast rock, even if they work the great mischief you say."

Roger admitted that the demolition of the rock was an impossibility, and that the garrison might escape hurt in their deep caves. He hoped, indeed, that the short range and the fact that the rock towered high above the mound would make it difficult for the gunners to drop their shells on the summit of the diz. Their task would be much easier if the range was doubled. But he felt a good deal perturbed. It was clear that the enemy were thoroughly in earnest. They were determined to capture Asker's stronghold, for reasons that had nothing to do with the chief's lukewarmness in his allegiance to the Padishah.

The Turkish engineers were preparing the gun emplacement methodically and without hurry. It would be some hours before the bombardment could be begun, and there was nothing to be gained by the watchers in waiting for it. No other movements were going on. They had learnt that the rock was to be shelled, and that scaling ladders were being made for a subsequent assault by infantry. With neither effort could they interfere. They could do nothing.

"Let us go back," said Roger at last.

"Why did we come?" grumbled Yusuf. "What is the profit? They will do what they will do, and we are without help. Would it not have been better to go on our journey

and at least have the comfort of our friends?"

"We have learnt somewhat, Yusuf. Without knowledge a man is as a leaf drifting on a stream. It whirls at the pleasure of the current, and by and by is cast upon the bank, and there it rots."

"Wallahi! It is Kismet: who can strive against fate?"

"Some of us think we can. At present we have to strive against Turks. Come, it

is time to be gone."

They withdrew from their watch-post, and began to retrace their way. Before long they perceived that the daylight held more hazards for them than the night. Here and there in the distance they caught sight of enemy patrols, and more than once had to lie low until the danger had passed. Unable to follow the regular tracks, they were forced to wind in and out among the crags, never knowing but that at some turn they might come suddenly face to face with the soldiers they wished above all to evade.

Towards the end of their journey, in trying to avoid a party of Turks in one direction, they stumbled into full view of two Kurds riding towards them up a narrow

gully worn by the rains in the hillside. Yusuf was on the point of bolting for cover, which at this spot happened to be scanty. The enemy were so near that there was little chance of escape, and Roger realized instantly that the mere act of running away would probably seal their fate. If a rifle shot failed, the well-mounted Kurds would soon ride down two tired men on foot, and Yusuf's knowledge of the hills would hardly save them when the patrol could summon assistance from so many directions. In a flash Roger saw the one only chance. He wore the basket-maker's dress provided by the dervish: Yusuf the uniform of a Turkish trooper. They must brazen it out, trusting to their wits, and seize any opportunity that offered either of slipping away from the Kurds or of overpowering them.

Roger had already, in a curt murmur, told Yusuf not to run. The Kurds had seen them, and were clearly at the first moment unsuspicious, no doubt reassured by the Turkish uniform. In a few seconds they would meet.

"Why are you dismounted?" Roger asked his companion rapidly. "Because you have been chased by Russians."

"And my horse was killed," rejoined Yusuf instantly, his quick wit seizing the point.

"And who am I?"

Arab inventiveness at once sprang into

play.

"You are the man that saved me when a Russian hand was thrust out to seize me. You—"

At this moment one of the Kurds hailed them. Yusuf called a suitable reply, and

with Roger moved on to meet them.

"We are well met," he said, with a sufficient air of condescension. A trooper in a regular regiment considers himself more important than a Kurdish cavalryman. "Know that I, Suleiman Megri, of the Pasha's bodyguard, bear news of great moment to his excellency. Wallahi! This poor hill-man at my side has done me good service, and thereby also served the Padishah well. By the Beard, you come in right good season to help us on our way, and am I of so mean a spirit as to grudge you a share of the great reward that will assuredly be ours?"

"This is good news, friend," said one of the Kurds; "for in truth our purses are empty for lack of pay, and in these hills there are no fat merchants to squeeze. What is this great news? And how comes it that you, being a trooper of the bodyguard, go on foot?"

"Hear, then; and Allah's be the praise! Being sent forth with another of the body-guard to gather news for the Pasha—even as you were sent forth, most excellent Kurds—lo! yonder in the hills, a great way off, I saw an army of Russians, a great host."

"Wallahi!" ejaculated the Kurd. "It was told us that our eyes must be lifted up to espy Ingliz or Hindustanis. How should Russians be thereabouts?"

"Verily that is the greatness of my tidings. Even as I turned about with Ahmed my soul's brother to bring that news, lo! a band of Russians—dogs of kafirs—sprang forth from a nook where they had hidden, and Ahmed was shot. Thereupon I fled away, and my good horse having winged feet I was already outstripping the kafirs when, woe is me! the beast stumbled and fell, and his leg being broken, could rise no more. Wallahi! Then did I believe I should see my end; that my lamp would

be put out, and my smoke quenched. But lo! this poor man broke forth from a bed of reeds, wherein he had gathered material for his trade, and clasped me with his arms, and bore me away to that green and shady refuge. There we lay until the kafirs were weary of searching; and then this my deliverer brought me by hill paths even to this place. And now, my worthy friends, if you will serve the Pasha, and moreover share in that reward which awaits the bearer of great news, lend us your aid and speed us on our way. But if, which Allah forbid! you have no mind either to do good or to share our prosperity, who am I to constrain you? Go in peace!"

Yusuf's confidence had grown with every fresh sentence of his daring improvisation, and Roger was secretly amused at the lordly condescension of his final words. He had pitched the right note for the covetous souls of the Kurds. They agreed to direct the two men; at Yusuf's veiled suggestion they agreed to give them seats behind them. Roger and Yusuf exchanged a meaning glance. They vaulted up, and while the Kurds still held slack reins, they were suddenly seized from behind and jerked violently from their saddles. When they regained



AMAZEMENT OF TWO KURDS.

their wits, it was in time to see the tails of their horses disappearing over the slope.

"Wallahi!" exclaimed Yusuf, brimming with delight. "The Osmanli is stupid, but by my father's eyes the Kurd is a very perfect ass."

CHAPTER XI

THE AMBUSH

No further perils beset the two companions on their journey to the cave. There they found the rest of the party assembled. Roger was anxious to hear what the other scouts had discovered; but he had to wait patiently while Yusuf related, at great length and with a variety of fantastic embroidery, the manner of the Kurds' discomfiture,—a solo bravura with chorus of "Wallah! Billah! Barikallah!"

When Yusuf was sated with self-praise and the compliments of the Arabs, Roger got a report from the other scouts. The sum total of the information gleaned was far from reassuring. A large mixed force of Turks and Kurds, horse and foot, was encamped below the barrage, close to the track that ran beside the watercourse. A smaller force was posted beyond the defile, where it opened out into the wide fertile valley on which Asker's people grew their crops. Both the entrance and the exit of

the basin, therefore, were sealed. The scouts were not clear as to the numbers of the enemy, but they had a keen eye for detail, and by piecing together the items they mentioned, Roger estimated that the investing army might number from two thousand to three thousand men.

The enemy's dispositions had evidently been taken with the idea of avoiding any risk of being trapped. No danger was to be apprehended from the rock. That was lightly garrisoned, and its defenders were not at all likely to attempt the foolhardy feat of sallying out. The fact that they had not interfered with the construction of a gun emplacement was clear proof of weakness. Whatever danger might arise would come from outside the basin, not from within. For this reason, and for the further reason that a force, if besieged in the basin, might find it hard to get out, the greater part of the investing force was held outside the rim. Roger had no doubt that the fortress would speedily be reduced by bombardment, and then, fortified with modern artillery, by the victors, and properly provisioned, it could defy all efforts to retake it, for the neighbourhood was wholly unsuited to the placing of heavy guns.

It seemed that Asker's much-vaunted stronghold was doomed to fall. The chief's own fighting men, perhaps five hundred all told, had fled. They had no allies. The British were blocked by the Turkish lines below Kut-el-Amara, many miles to the south. The Russians were equally far away, somewhere to the north-east. There was, it was true, a body of Indian horse reconnoitring in the hills, for whom the enemy, to judge from what the Kurd had said, were on the watch. But this small part of the British forces was not strong enough to interfere with the operations of the Turks around the rock; indeed, it ran great risk of being cut off and rounded up in the hills.

Roger felt depressed at the outlook. The enemy evidently attached much importance to the possession of the rock; it was a thousand pities that nothing could be done to disappoint them. From his personal standpoint he was stranded. He saw no prospect of doing anything to help Asker, nor of getting through to his own countrymen. Here he was, in a hill cave, companion to thirteen Arabs, five of whom had lances and pistols, the rest pistols and rifles, with little ammunition, scanty provisions, and no forage for the horses. He might well wish

that Firouz Ali had carried out his first scheme—to send him down the Tigris as a kelakji.

However, repining was useless. His fortunes were for the present bound up with those of his companions; he must make the best of the situation.

Yusuf was alive to the immediate necessities, food and forage. This was really the least of their anxieties. The Arabs are probably the most expert freebooters in the world. There were villages to be plundered; but, those apart, with a well-found Turkish army within reach it would be a poorspirited Arab who could not supply all reasonable bodily needs.

After a consultation, some of the thirteen, chosen for their proven skill, were deputed to go out foraging. One of them, in response to the demand of his friends, related with much complacency a story of his own cleverness, which, though no doubt they had heard it scores of times before, they listened to now with grave attention.

"Mashallah! I tell what my eyes have seen and my hands have done. It fell on a day that I beheld a man of exceeding great size, and wearing circles of glass upon his nose, dismount from his horse and go with

paper and pencil towards a ruin; and there this man, by report a German, did mark upon his paper a picture of that broken and worthless place, as is the way of these Giaours." (Roger smiled: was he not one of them?) "And being in great dread lest, while he did that foolish thing, some cunning person should cast an eye upon his horse and lead it away, he held the bridle in one hand, while he made those black marks with the other. And behold! when his soul was satisfied with what he had done, and he was minded to pursue his journey, there was the bridle fast in his hand, but where was the horse?"

The narrator here made the expected pause, and his audience begged him to continue.

"Mashallah! The horse was between my

legs, bearing me over the plain."

Roger was more amused at the gravity of the Arabs than at the story. He wondered sometimes if an Arab could smile.

Yusuf pointed the moral.

"Wallah! A Turk is stupid; a Kurd is stupider; but in very truth a German must be the stupidest of all"—a judgment which Roger thought pathetically unsound. The German is only stupid in parts.

Having been up all night, Yusuf and Roger slept through the greater part of the day. Aroused at dusk, they wished good luck to the party of foragers then setting out, and sat on a rock in the cool air outside the cave, to talk over the situation. Yusuf took a very gloomy view. The Arab's quickness of wit usually shows itself when he is confronted with a sudden emergency and his safety depends on his ability to throw dust in an opponent's eyes. He has little foresight, or power of combining ideas. If things go hardly with him, and a real effort is needed to overcome adverse circumstances, he is prone to fold his hands, and resign himself to fate. Such was Yusuf's attitude now. On the one side were the Turks in great force; on the other, unfriendly tribes, half Arab, half Persian. If left to himself he would probably have remained with his companions in the cave, subsisting on plunder, and hoping that some day or other the Turks would withdraw, and the inhabitants of the settlement return.

Roger's temperament, naturally, was wholly different. To a true-born Englishman, difficulty is a spur to effort. He regards himself as the master of his fate, not its abject slave. And at this moment

Roger, though he saw no clear way out, was bending his mind to find one. Nor was he concerned only with himself and his companions in misfortune. The problem, as it appeared to him, was much larger than the fate of fourteen. It included the impending struggle for the possession of the diz, and the safety of the body of Indian cavalry reconnoitring in the hills. In regard to the former, he felt helpless. Obviously fourteen men, of whom one was wounded, and half were practically unarmed, were powerless against two or three thousand Turks, equipped with small arms and mountain guns. But in regard to the latter—a matter nearer to his heart, for were not the Indians led by a British officer ?—he refused to admit to himself that all hope must be abandoned.

The situation of the Indians was perilous in the extreme. Their direct way back to their own lines was blocked by the Turks. If they tried to return by a long round through the hills they would be at the mercy of the fierce local tribes. And there seemed not the remotest likelihood that, finding themselves thus cut off, they could reach the Russians far to the north-east. In all probability they would lose themselves in the hills, and perish, or at least fall into

captivity. It was not in an English boy to sit still and make no attempt to save them.

"Yusuf," he said, "do you not think we

could find those Indians?"

"Without doubt, Aga, if we search all Luristan and Kirmanshah. But what would it profit us?"

"I was not thinking of our profit, but of

theirs."

"Billah! What would it profit them? The road is shut to them. They are lost."

"Could you not show them a way through

the hills, without touching the road?"

"Can horses climb crags like goats, and wriggle through crevices like the mountain conies?"

"Without horses, then?"

"By the Beard! on foot, and led by me, they might creep through the hills, and after many days arrive where they would be, if peradventure they escaped the hands of the Lurs. But why talk we thus idly? To search for them would cost us much labour and perils without number."

"Yet I think we should try, and, for myself, I am ready to put it to the proof."

"Wallah! It is more foolish than the folly of dreams, and we do but waste our breath. I have said it."

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There was nothing to be done with Yusuf in this mood, and Roger was wise enough not to press him further.

Soon after dawn, however, when the foragers returned well furnished with food for man and beast, a piece of news they brought stimulated Roger to a fresh attempt. They had seen a large detachment of cavalry passing rapidly northward from the direction of the basin. Roger asked its numbers. "About five hundred," was the reply. "Not a reconnoitring party," he thought, and jumped to an inference. What could be more likely than that the Turks had had information of the Indians' reconnaissance and were riding to capture them? It was more than ever necessary that something should be done at least to warn his fellowcountrymen.

He opened up the subject again with Yusuf, who admitted that his inference was

probably correct.

"Then if we could keep the Turks in view, we should learn in what direction to look for the Indians, and might be in time to save them."

Yusuf was still reluctant. He urged objection after objection: the Turks had too good a start; the Arabs could not ride as fast,

because they must not venture upon the road, and the hills were too rough; they might themselves be cut off from the cave.

Roger set himself patiently, yet as swiftly as might be, to overcome the opposition. He learnt from the foragers that the Turks, when seen, were about two miles away, and riding in a direction that would bring them on to the old caravan route to Kirmanshah. Pressed by his questions, Yusuf acknowledged that, winding through the lower slopes of the hills, they would have forty miles or more of rough travelling before they reached the road, and that men on foot, familiar with the country, could gain the same spot by short cuts in about ten miles, without being likely to encounter hostile tribesmen on the way.

"Then I am going," said Roger resolutely. "There is no need for the rest to go. I know the direction, and I will find the way."

"By the soul of my father! that shall not be," cried Yusuf. "You are of a stiffnecked race, like your father before you; and if your heart is set on this folly, can I abandon one who has eaten the salt of my chief?"

[&]quot;My heart is fixed, Yusuf."

"Then I will strip off these garments of the vile Turks, and put on those of one of my friends here, and we will go. May Allah send us peace!"

In a few minutes, provided with a day's supply of food, they set out afoot on their journey across the hills. On their left the boom of guns announced that the bombardment of the rock had begun.

Yusuf's lynx eyes soon descried the Turkish horsemen miles below and ahead of them. That they had not turned westward across the plain was proof that their objective was indeed the Kirmanshah road, and Yusuf at once struck off to the north-east.

The next four hours were the most laborious and fatiguing that Roger had ever known. Yusuf was remorseless. He pushed on without pause, diving into ravines, scaling crags, sliding down steep declivities, with an energy that admitted no doubt of his goodwill. Roger followed him doggedly. As the morning wore on, the heat grew terrible, and would have been unendurable but for the cool hill streams here and there, in which they drank and bathed heads and feet.

At last, about noon, they reached a point from which the Turks must be visible if they had pursued the course presumed. From their lofty perch the Kirmanshah road was in sight for a distance of five or six miles. Far to the left it ran through a gorge between the hills. A mile or two nearer to them, there appeared to be another gorge branching off in a northerly direction.

"Where does that lead to?" Roger asked.

"Only to a long valley, Aga, which is closed like a bottle at the further end. If the dogs are upon the road, we shall presently see them appear in the opening of that neck yonder to the left."

They squatted in their eyrie, glad to rest, and sufficiently covered to escape observation from the road. They ate some food, talking little, scarcely removing their eyes from the gorge. At this, the hottest part of the day, there was no traffic: such caravans as might be travelling had stopped in some shady spot until the heat was past.

It was nearly three hours before the watchers saw any movement. Then two horsemen appeared at the entrance of the gorge, riding slowly. Presently a few more emerged, and then a compact body between one and two hundred strong. On reaching the opening in the hills that, according to Yusuf, was a cul-de-sac, they turned into it,

and disappeared. No more showed them-selves. Once more the road was deserted.

"Where are the rest?" said Roger. "They

said there were five hundred."

- "By the Beard! it is a witty invention," cried Yusuf. "These few are gone into the hole yonder to lie in wait. The others abide still in the gorge. The Indians, coming along the road, will pass the hole, not knowing of the enemy lurking within, and then suddenly these will spring out, and lo! your friends will be as corn between the upper and the nether mill-stone: not a man of them will be left alive."
 - "They have us to reckon with, Yusuf."
- "Mashallah! Let us now see whether their wits are a match for ours."

CHAPTER XII

SCUDDY SMITH

In a green palm-shaded dell a little way off the Kirmanshah road, by the bank of a trickling stream, a squadron of Bengal Lancers was preparing to leave its bivouac. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The troopers, who seemed weary and dispirited, had rested there during the heat of the day. and watered their jaded horses. Some of them were wounded, as appeared by the white bandages that swathed head or limbs. They looked gloomily up into the rugged hills. There was none of the usual bustle that accompanies the saddle-up of cavalry about to move-no martial jangling accoutrements. Everything was done quietly as might be.

The British officer in command, wearing the three stars of a captain on his sleeve, was talking quietly in English to his jemadar.

"I think we have shaken off the lot that gave us trouble this morning, Muhammad Khan. They know there's no loot to be got, and probably won't think it worth while to follow us beyond their own ground. But I'm puzzled by the changed attitude of these hill-men. They were friendly enough on the way up, or I shouldn't have come so far. How do you account for the change?"

"It looks very ill, sahib," replied the native officer. "They may have received news."

"Well, the only news that would explain their hostility must be unfavourable to us. The surrender at Kut has enormously damaged our prestige, and the Germans in Bagdad are no doubt feeding the people with lies about the situation in Europe. However, another day's march should bring us to the edge of the plain. And we must have another look at that rock-stronghold; perhaps this time the suspicious old chief will let us inspect it. It's by far the strongest position we have found, and if it could be seized would be invaluable to a force advancing on this line. A battalion with a couple of guns could hold it against a division. The chief would cut up rough, of course, if our people decided to take it; but we'd handsomely compensate him when all is over. You don't think he too has already turned against us?"

"One cannot tell, sahib. It is true he spoke of his friendship with the English sahib; but these Arabs are very fickle and treacherous."

"Ah yes! And I wonder what has become of that boy? But it's time we got off. Get them into marching order,

jemadar."

In a few minutes the squadron filed quietly across the dell, up the gradual slope beyond, and at length gained the road. No precaution was neglected. Two troopers rode in advance, and two in the rear; between them came the main body.

The road was still silent and deserted. But after they had ridden about a couple of miles, one of the vedettes came back with a prisoner. It was a youth, apparently an Arab, with a complexion the colour of leather, and wearing very soiled and tattered garments. The trooper reported that he had made no attempt to evade capture, and no resistance.

Having handed him over the trooper rode back with orders to his companion to halt until receipt of further instructions. The captain called up his interpreter and proceeded to question the prisoner.

"Who are you?"

"I am Nadan, the son of a poor basket-maker, effendi," was the reply.

"Where do you come from?"

"From a village of the Beni Lam, effendi."

"What village?"

"The village of Asker."

"Are you one of Asker's men?"

"No, effendi; my tribe is far away."

"Why are you alone?"

"Asker and his people have fled, effendi. There came a large force of Turks, and seized the village, and they have set up guns to bombard the diz. I and some few of Asker's men sheltered in a cave in the hills."

"Why have you left them?"

"I am seeking friends, effendi."

The captain asked the interpreter in Hindustani whether the answers seemed credible. The man saw no reason to doubt them. The prisoner was evidently a very poor lad, dressed as a basket-maker might be expected to be; and there was nothing improbable in the flight of Asker before a superior force of Turks. To this the jemadar added that the story, if true, would account for the sudden hostility of the hill tribes. Friendly or indifferent so long as they had no reason to be otherwise, they would try

to curry favour with what they believed to be the winning side, and how could they do so more effectively than by harassing the losers? And as for the young basket-maker travelling alone, in search of friends, nothing was more likely, for he was not worth robbing, and he would naturally wish to get back to his own people rather than remain in danger with men of a strange tribe in trouble.

The captain looked steadily at the prisoner, who returned his gaze without flinching.

"Of course one can't trust these Arabs," said the officer in English to his native subaltern. "This lad seems honest. He hasn't quite the hang-dog look of some of them."

"It's a jolly good job for you, Scuddy Smith, that you don't think so!"

The officer stared, gasped, ejaculated. It was certainly the dirty, shabby young Arab who had spoken, and was now looking at him all smiles and twinkles.

"Why, who the deuce—bless my soul, you don't mean to say—I'm hanged if it isn't Rags Burnet! Well, of all the—I say, old chap, this is splendid."

The grave Indians watched with silent amazement as their officer shook hands



F 2 A SURPRISE FOR SCUDDY SMITH.

heartily with the disreputable-looking Arab. What did the dog mean by calling their honoured captain sahib Scuddy Smith? It

was beyond understanding.

"Now, look here, Smith," said Roger, "explanations will keep. I've wasted time as it is, but I couldn't resist trying my disguise on you. You're in a tight corner, old man.—By Jove! I'm glad it's you.—There are four or five hundred Turks waiting to ambush you a few miles up the road. You can't possibly get through. Even if you could, you'd only run up against a thousand or two more about Asker's diz."

Captain Smith whistled.

"That's pretty rotten," he said quietly. "Nothing to be done?"

Roger turned and made a sign with his hand towards the hills on the left. A head and shoulders appeared over a rock, and an arm was vigorously waved with a gesture

of beckoning.

"That's a good friend of mine," said Roger. "He's keeping an eye on the road beyond. He evidently won't come down to us, but I think he wants us to go up to him. There's just foothold for the horses the way I came, so you'd better get your men along."

The vedettes were recalled and the whole

party, following Roger, filed through a narrow, steep, and tortuous cleft in the hill-side. At the spot where Yusuf had posted himself there was no clear, level space, but the troopers found room among the crags, out of sight from the road.

Roger introduced Yusuf to his old school friend. They hurriedly discussed ways and means. To avoid the ambuscade would be easy enough, and by a very toilsome march they could reach the cave; but it seemed quite impossible to get through, by the only practicable road, the enemy's main body encamped across it at Asker's diz. Captain Smith's recent experiences showed only too clearly that any attempt to penetrate to the south across the hills would be to court disaster. The country was up in arms. Nor was it any more possible to push northward in the hope of joining the Russians. When starting on his reconnaissance he had hoped to get into touch with them; but it appeared that their advance in western Persia about Hamadan had been checked, and the increasing hostility of the tribes had compelled him to turn back.

"We have had two or three scraps," he said, "and though the honours were with us we've had losses. As you see, there are

more than a dozen wounded, luckily with clean bullet wounds; and we've had to leave a few killed. We left H.Q. a hundred and twenty strong: I wonder how many of us will get back."

"Every man jack of you that's left," said Roger confidently. "We'll get you to our cave; that's the first step; the next we

won't trouble about just now."

"But your cave won't hold us all?"
"I think it will, including the horses."

"Then there's the question of food: that's been our great difficulty lately. The first few days out the tribesmen sold us food and forage readily enough; but lately they've refused to bargain, and we've had to commandeer, which of course they resented. Their change of attitude was very mysterious; but the cause is plain enough now."

"Don't worry about food. My Arab friends could give points to the cleverest poachers at home. Of course you won't get fat, and may have to go short sometimes; but let's hope it won't be for long. The only real bother is the horses: they need such a quantity of fodder. I'll see what Yusuf says about that."

Yusuf at once declared that the horses could not be supplied. The large quantities

they required could not be obtained without grave risk of bringing suspicious hill-men upon their tracks. Indeed, though the cave was large enough to hold them all, it was practically impossible to ride or even to lead them over the rough hills in its immediate neighbourhood. The horses must be abandoned.

"That's awkward," said Smith, pulling a long face. "How in the world am I to get any of my sowars to leave their horses? They'd give up everything else sooner."

"Wallah! The Indians are good men," remarked Yusuf when this was explained to him. "But there is yet a way. I know a little valley, quite shut in, where in times past, when in similar straits, we have turned our horses loose and found them again after many days. Verily at this season the pasture is scanty; but it is enough to keep the fire of life burning within them, and there is a small brook that never runs dry."

This information seemed to remove the last of the difficulties, and any lingering hesitation there might have been in Captain Smith's mind was dispelled in a minute or two. Yusuf, who had not ceased to keep a sharp look-out on the road, announced that horsemen were approaching from the direc-

tion of the ambush. No doubt the Turks wondered why their expected victims had not yet appeared. It was dangerous to delay: any slight sound might betray them. Accordingly the word was given, and the squadron followed Yusuf across the rough stony ground, in a course at right angles with the road.

The hills became more and more difficult as they proceeded. Before long they had to dismount and lead their horses. It was dusk when they reached the valley, or rather cup, high up in the hills, of which Yusuf had spoken. There they turned the horses loose, and continued their journey on foot, carrying the animals' trappings. It was a very worn and footsore body of men that marched at a late hour into the cave.

Of them all, perhaps Captain Smith and Roger were the least conscious of fatigue. They had had so much to talk about. Smith, called Scud or Scuddy because of his sprinting powers, was in the Upper VIth when Roger was in the Lower, and both were members of the Eleven.

The conversation began with an eager question from Roger.

"I say, before we compare personal notes, just tell me: how is the War going? I've

heard next to nothing I could believe for over a year."

"Well, we all think the tide has turned, or is turning, and the name at high-water mark is Verdun."

He gave a rapid outline of events from the early months of 1915. Most of it was quite fresh to Roger.

"All sorts of stories are rife in Bagdad," he said: "London in ashes, the King in chains, and the Kaiser striding the world! I guessed it was all tosh; and yet I couldn't help feeling a trifle uneasy, for, you see, the Gallipoli affair and the surrender at Kut are known facts and don't need any magnifying."

"Yes, they can't be burked. But after all, when you consider what a huge job we've taken in hand, and how little prepared we were, I don't think the old country comes out of it so badly. The Huns may lie and bluff to their hearts' content, but if you could see into them you'd find that their master feeling at the present time is not hate, nor cockiness, nor even pride in their army, but sheer amazement. What German, after forty years' intensive cultivation of militarism, would have dreamed it possible that simple, easy-going old England, whom

they have found it so easy to diddle, would buck up as she has done, and put into the field, after two years, an army man for man as good or better than their own! My dear man, it makes one glad to be alive to see it. What a bit of rotten luck it would have been if we'd happened to be born in the smug Victorian age, and had nothing more exciting to look back upon than antimacassars and the Sunday afternoon nap!"

"How you remind me of our old Debating Society, Scud! But, after all, you were born in the days of the old Queen. You are only twenty—a year older than me. Young for a captain, by gum! The youngest captain

in the British army, I bet."

"Not by a long chalk! I know several younger. Why, a fellow I know is a Brigadier-General at thirty-eight. Of course, in my case it's sheer luck—and the O.T.C. The hols had just begun when the war broke out, you remember—but you were away, now I come to think of it. I was down in Devonshire, and scudded up to London—"

"You would, Scud!"

"—on my motor-bike, and on the strength of five years' experience in the O.T.C. got a commission at once. They posted me to a line regiment at first, but my uncle got me transferred to his old regiment, the Bengal Lancers, and I was out in India nearly a year—just long enough to pick up a little Hindustani with the help of a munshi. Some of our officers fell out, for one reason or another, and as the establishment must be kept up I got my three stars rather soon."

"But you must have done well. They

don't promote duds."

"Rough luck on you to be out of it so long. We wondered what had become of you. I met Tibby Stevens one day, and asked him if he knew anything about you, and he said he didn't, but he'd stake his bottom dollar old Rags was in it somewhere. Do you remember how we used to rag you about Mesopotamia and archæology? I got a shock when the old chief yonder said you'd gone into Bagdad."

"He told you that, then?"

"It was like this. We came across him on the way up, and wanted him to show us his diz, but the old chap refused. Otherwise he was very decent, and explained that one of his best friends had been an Englishman: Burnet Aga, he called him. Of course I then asked about you, never dreaming you were actually hereabouts. Sorry about your pater, old man. The chief told me where

you'd gone, and what for, and I rather vexed him by telling him that with all respect to his barber brother I didn't think Bagdad was on the shortest route to our army. If you'd waited a few days we should have found you."

Roger smiled.

"But then you wouldn't have found us," said Smith instantly. "By gum! I've been yarning about myself all this time, and I'm burning to know all about you. A basketmaker! Tell me all about it."

Roger related his adventures; and thus, talking of the past and the present, hardly sparing a thought for the future, they whiled away the long slow journey.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DIZ

AFTER the fatigues of the day the whole party slept profoundly. At dawn the leaders discussed the pressing question of provisions, which, in spite of Roger's optimism, threatened to prove troublesome if the sojourn in the cave should be prolonged. Depredations on a large scale would inevitably infuriate the people despoiled, and they would keep watch and set traps for the robbers. Hence it was that, on this morning, the Englishmen's thoughts turned from memories of the past to anxieties for the future.

"In a day or two at furthest we must somehow make a push for our own lines," said Smith. "'The high hills are a refuge for the goats and the rocks for the conies' not for a squadron of His Majesty's Bengal

Lancers."

"Your numbers are the difficulty," replied Roger. "One or two might trudge over the hills in disguise, but a crowd in

uniform wouldn't have the ghost of a chance of getting through. We can trust Yusuf to provision us for a few days, at any rate; by that time we may see daylight."

The sound of methodical gun-fire broke

into their talk.

"They're at it," said Roger.

"Will the garrison cave in, do you think?" Smith asked.

"Not for a while. Ignorance is obstinacy in this case. Asker's people believe the diz impregnable, and probably don't know anything about the effect of modern shells. They'll stick it until they have positive proof that they're doomed."

"I wish I could have a look at what's

going on."

"I went with Yusuf the night before last. Perhaps he'll take us now. I'll ask him."

"Wallahi! Is the Aga mad?" was Yusuf's reply. "The sun is already up: can we overlook the place in the broad eye of day?"

"But you and I came back by daylight," Roger objected. "Why shouldn't we go by

daylight?"

Yusuf had no convincing answer to this, and ultimately allowed himself to be per-

suaded. Accordingly the three men set forth, and following the same route as that taken before, reached the look-out post without mishap.

Smith scanned the position with interest through his field-glasses, which he afterwards handed to Roger, and then to Yusuf. The latter's eyes, however, watered so much when he attempted to look through the glasses that he quickly gave them back.

"Verily this is a very evil device," he

said, disappointed and annoyed.

The situation had not greatly changed since Roger's last visit. Two guns, placed on the flat-topped mound at the base of the landslide, were pounding away on a limited area of the rock-face below the platform. The Turkish forces were still posted at the northern and southern ends of the defile. Within the basin there was more activity than before. Men were conveying scaling ladders from the copse to a spot within a few hundred yards of the rock, where they were piling them at several points. And a little nearer to the rock other men were erecting what appeared to be roughly constructed derricks.

"Why on earth don't they snipe them

from the rock?" said Smith.

"Partly because they're lying low to avoid the shells, partly because they're saving their ammunition for a possible assault, and partly, perhaps, because they're still cocksure the place can't be taken."

"Then they're living in a fool's paradise. You see the scheme? The gunners are banging away with the idea of smashing one particular portion of the rock surface until they have brought down enough stuff to make a sort of glacis they can climb up with the aid of the ladders. When they've done that they'll repeat the operation to right and left, so that they can assault the place at several points simultaneously. And unless I'm mistaken, the derricks are for hoisting the guns up. If they succeed, as in time they must, Asker will never perch on his diz again."

They watched in silence for a while. The report of the guns reverberated over the hills. Columns of smoke, mingled with dust and fragments of rock, rose at each shell-burst, and they could hear the rumble and crash as the debris fell to the base.

"It'll be two or three days before they're ready for the assault," remarked Smith presently.

Roger agreed. There was silence again.

"Just explain the lie of the land," said Smith presently. "I know the road, of course, and I noticed that old barrage to the left yonder; but I didn't examine the whole basin. Is there any other feature worth noting?"

"There's only the conduit, so far as I know—like any other old conduit," replied

Roger.

"Ah! Where is it?"

"Behind the gun emplacement; there was a landslide, you see; and this end is quite blocked up."

"What about the other end?"

"It's somewhere in the hills yonder; it runs through them, you know. You can get to it from the cave."

"Easily?"

"Oh yes! It's only a mile or two."

"H'm! I wonder whether the Turks know anything about this conduit?"

"It's unlikely. They haven't bothered about that side of the basin or this: the ring of hills is sufficient defence."

Smith stroked his incipient, hardly visible moustache, and catching a smile on Roger's

face, remarked:

"What are you grinning at, young Rags? I've got one good hair!"

"Ch yes! I quite appreciate that; but I should never think of rubbing it in."

"What then? Do you see anything

funny in my questions?"

"No: they all seem quite natural."

- "Then, hang it! what were you grinning at?"
- "I was only wondering how long you'd take to get there."

"Where?"

"Why, into the basin, you silly ass." A slow smile spread over Smith's face.

"You were leading up to that all the time, you beggar! Well, I'll square up with you for that another day. But seriously, it's a good sound scheme, eh? We'll go back and have a pow-wow. All we want to know is, what goes on here after dark."

"Yusuf will come and report, I dare

say."

"I'd rather see for myself. We'll have to come again. By the way, have you any idea how much of that conduit is blocked?"

"About fifty feet. My pater set me on

to calculate it."

"Good! You were always swagger at maths. Tell Yusuf we're off now: the cave's cooler than this. It's lucky we're so high above sea-level: down in the

plains the mosquitoes at this time of year are the very deuce."

Under Yusuf's guidance they regained the cave, where they remained in close consultation until near dusk. Then, while a party of the Arabs went foraging, they retraced their toilsome way to the look-out point above the basin. The journey had been timed so that they should have a few minutes' observation by twilight. The guns had ceased work, and been left under guard of a few men. The basin was now deserted. and the smoke of camp-fires beyond the two extremities of the defile showed that the evening meal was being prepared. Faint sounds came from the distance. The watchers waited until it was quite dark. The enemy had made no further movements. It appeared conclusive that, with the exception of the men guarding the guns, there were, at night, no Turks nearer than the encampments on the further side of the rock, at least half a mile away.

"It looks promising, don't you think?"

said Roger as they went back.

"Almost too promising. The general arrangements seem to show a German mind at work; but it's contrary to elementary maxims to leave guns unsupported. That's

not German. But the whole position is quite exceptional. They know the garrison is too weak to make a sortie, and, as you say, don't dream of any danger from these hills. Still, I'm inclined to think that the Germans have left the Turks to themselves this time."

A little before daybreak on the following morning, the wild denizens of the hills, rabbits, rock-snakes and other creatures, were no doubt startled at the unusual sight of a number of brown-clad figures stealing along through their secluded haunts. The cave was deserted except for the wounded men, two of Asker's men, and the horses of Yusuf's party. Some of the Arabs had already wended their way north-eastward towards the vale in which the Lancers' horses had been loosed. The Indians, carrying their rifles and entrenching tools, followed Yusuf and the two Englishmen southward. working round over the pathless hills in the direction of the conduit.

When this latter party reached their destination, Captain Smith posted two men as sentries, and ordered the rest to station themselves wherever there was good cover among the rocks. He then, with Yusuf and Roger, entered the conduit and pro-

ceeded along it until he came to the spot where further progress was barred by the landslide. Probing the fallen mass, he turned and said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"Yes, it can be done. The stuff is mainly a sort of silt mingled with fragments of rock. It will take us best part of the day to cut a tunnel through it, and, as I expected, we shall need something to buttress the walls and shore up the roof. We'll set about getting that until the baskets are ready."

Returning to his men, he sent some of them to collect slabs of loose rock on the hill-side, and others into the southern end of the copse where, a few days previously, the Turks had felled trees for their scaling ladders. Here he set them to break off and roughly trim such branches as would serve as struts. These men he had accompanied himself in order to ensure that they worked in perfect silence. Fortunately the recurring boom of the guns at the edge of the basin beyond helped to drown any sounds within the copse.

When the morning was well advanced, the party was joined by the Arabs, who carried baskets roughly woven of reeds obtained from the banks of the stream that flowed through the vale before mentioned.

"Will they serve, Mr. Basket-maker?" Smith asked of Roger.

"They are better than that dish-cover hat the old man was so scornful about."

"Then we'll set to work."

He summoned up a small group of the Indians and ordered them to begin digging, the object being to clear a passage through the landslide wide enough for two men, bending low, to go abreast. As the earth was dug out, it was carried away in the baskets and spread over the floor of the conduit. Behind the diggers, other men buttressed the sides of the tunnel with the slabs of rock, and strutted the roof with the branches from the copse.

The heat was very great, and the workers were frequently relieved by other squads of their comrades.

"It was lucky we thought of propping it up," said Smith, when several feet of the tunnel had been completed. "It wouldn't have been necessary, perhaps, if they weren't bombarding; the earth here is pretty firmly consolidated; but, as you see, the vibration caused by the guns brings some of it down, and we might have had a bad fall."

His reasoning was justified some hours later. The men had made rapid progress,

in spite of their care to avoid noise. It happened late in the afternoon that the two guns fired together, and with the heavy concussion the working face of the tunnel collapsed, showing a thin streak of daylight. Work instantly ceased, and the two Englishmen crept forward to reconnoitre through the fissure, hoping that the fall of earth had not been sufficient to attract the attention of the gunners beyond. They were able to see a corner of the gun platform some little distance to their left. The gunners had apparently not been disturbed; no doubt they had become accustomed to slight falls of stone and earth. Only a small area of the basin was visible, the remainder being concealed by a shoulder of the hill and by large loose rocks, part of the landslide.

"So far, so good," said Smith. "The men are all pretty well done up. I'll get one of the Arabs to take us back, leaving you and Yusuf to make the next move. I hardly like to leave you."

"Don't worry about that. Yusuf has all his wits about him. Even if we are collared, I'd back him to pitch some yarn that will satisfy the Turks. But assuming the worst, carry out the scheme in spite of it. The

fellows on the diz will be quick enough to see what you are driving at if they catch sight of the Arabs among you. Or you can make an opportunity of communicating with them when the first part of the job is done."

"In that case, why run any risks?"

"Because the job will be easier and shorter if they are warned what to expect and instructed how to help. It's quite all

right, I assure you."

It was about three hours later, night had fallen, and the stars twinkled in an indigo sky; the bombardment had ceased, and to all appearance there were no Turks in the basin except the gunners. In this silence and darkness the fissure in the landslide was quickly enlarged, and two figures crept through one after the other. They bore to the right, away from the gun platform, from which they heard the voices of the men on guard; and flitting from rock to rock under the cliff wall of the basin, and among the patches of scrub that here and there found subsistence, they came at last to a certain point opposite the face of the diz.

Here they paused for a few moments. The gun platform was now far on their left. The guard were amusing themselves with some game by the light of a single lantern. There was no light observable in the basin; none on the diz; but the sky westward, beyond the ends of the defile, was dimly lit by the glow of the Turkish camp-fires, which, however, threw no illumination on the basin below.

Between the two figures and the dark towering rock there lay several hundred yards of stony ground, dipping slightly towards the middle of the basin, and bare except for patchy and straggling vegetation like that which struggled for life on and at the base of the low cliffs.

Having assured themselves that there were no men within their somewhat limited view, Yusuf and Roger stole across the basin towards the diz. The ground was so stony that to move wholly without sound was impossible; but the enemy was too far distant to hear the slight rustling and crackling under their feet.

When they had almost reached the rock, they had a nearer view of the piles of scaling ladders and the derricks which Roger had before seen through the field-glasses. They noticed also the dark shapes of various objects the nature of which they could not at present determine. With a definite

errand in view, and unknown risks of detection, it was no time to delay.

Yusuf had directed his course across the basin so as to arrive at the foot of the diz where it was steepest, immediately beneath the platform on which the chief's small stone houses stood. The mass of broken rock brought down by the bombardment was some distance to their left. There was another brief pause, during which they listened intently, and peered through the dark all about them. Then Roger, although he knew what was coming, almost jumped when he heard within a foot of him a low mournful wail, like the cry of some animal in pain. An interval of silence followed: then Yusuf repeated the cry, looking up the dark face of the rock above him. Again all was still. Roger tingled with suspense. And now it was as if an owl hooted from some roost high up the rocky pile.

Yusuf touched Roger's sleeve, a sign that all was well. In a few moments a stout rope, looped at the end, dangled before their eyes. Before they started on this night expedition the two men had spent some time in settling a question of precedence. Yusuf, strongly imbued with the Arab's sense of duty to a guest, had wished

Roger to be the first to ascend the rock, in case interruption came from the enemy before both could do so. Roger, however, contended that Yusuf, as the chief's right-hand man, would be recognized and welcomed by the garrison more readily than he, and thus there would be less risk of noise and bustle likely to be noticed by the enemy. In the end Roger had his way. Yusuf was hauled up to the platform, with scarcely a sound. In a few minutes the rope came down again, and Roger soon joined his friend, among the little garrison of barely a score of Arabs left by Asker to hold the fort.

There was no time to waste: a good deal hung on the speedy return of the visitors. In the course of the brief conversation that followed, Roger found that his surmises were accurate. The Arabs were still quite confident that the stronghold could not be taken. They had not been impressed by the effects of the bombardment, supposing that its object was to batter down the whole rock—a feat worthy of giants. Even when Roger explained what the enemy's real intention was, they declared that they could hold out on the platform for some time; if dislodged from that, they would

ascend to the top of the rock, and defy the assailants there. It was useless to argue with them: Roger had not come to argue, but to prepare their minds for what was to come, and to arrange that, at the right moment, their assistance should be available.

While he was still talking to them, there came the bang of a gun, and almost simultaneously a roar and crash as the shell struck the rock, which quivered as with the tremor of a slight earthquake. It was the first time the enemy had bombarded by night. Roger wondered what was their reason for hurry. Clearly there was all the more need for him to rejoin Captain Smith without delay. He quickly finished his explanations with Asker's lieutenant, and in a few minutes was swinging from the rock at the end of a forty feet rope.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAPTURE OF THE GUNS

ABOUT two hours before daybreak, Jemadar Muhammad Khan, at the head of forty troopers, followed Yusuf through the narrow opening in the outer wall of the conduit. The party stole their way along the edge of the basin, as Yusuf and Roger had done several hours earlier. Instead of pausing midway, however, they pushed on in the same direction until they finally halted within a few hundred yards of the northern end of the defile, beyond which the smaller portion of the Turkish force was encamped. Their movements had been very cautious: they held their weapons closely to prevent any clashing, though all sounds would probably have been smothered by the noise of the bombardment, which had gone on vigorously all night.

Perhaps an hour later, another body of men emerged one by one from the same gap—all the remaining unwounded troopers of the squadron, led by Captain Smith and Roger Burnet. This second party did not follow the first, but found what cover they could among the rocks at the foot of the cliff within a hundred yards of the gun platform. There they watched the recurrent flashing of the guns, in the intervals hearing the rumble of the gunners' talk.

It was the darkest hour of the night, and to the men waiting there it seemed an age before the sky over the hills on their right gave any sign that day was at hand. When the sharp ridges were at last visible, darkness still wrapped the silent party round. Presently, however, they were just able to see the gunners at those moments when these were not clearly lit up by the flashes from the guns. Every trooper had lance and carbine, and Captain Smith had given Roger a spare revolver, a weapon which he had not previously used, but which Smith insisted on his taking.

When Roger was asked afterwards what his feelings were at this moment—the moment before going into action for the first time in his life—he said that he was conscious only of eagerness and exhilaration. He did not "get the wind up," nor feel more nervous than if he had been waiting merely for the kick-off at a football match.

There were just over a score of men on the gun platform. Captain Smith had told off an equal number of troopers: the remainder were to hold themselves in reserve. Each of the twenty was to mark his man, and make for him at the given signal. Owing to the scattered positions of the rocks behind which the men were sheltered it was impossible to give the signal by signs; much as the captain would have wished to avoid sound altogether, he had decided that only his whistle would serve. This could not fail to be heard by the enemy; but the distance between the rocks and the gun platform was so short, and the element of surprise should be so great, that the one shrill blast ought not to prove a grave disadvantage.

The captain had given orders that only the lance was to be used. There was to be no firing. The main body of the Turks would learn what was going on soon enough without being warned prematurely by shots.

At last, when there was just enough light to reveal each individual of the gun teams, Smith turned to Roger, who crouched beside him, and whispered:

[&]quot;After the next shot?"

[&]quot;Righto!"

198 THE CAPTURE OF THE GUNS

The gun was fired. The distant crash of the exploding shell mingled with the rolling reverberations in the basin. Before the sounds had died away, a single sharp whistle rose high above the rumble, and the score of silent figures sprinted forward towards the platform. Startled by the unexpected sound, the gunners swung round. For a moment they appeared to be petrified at the sight of these dusky turbaned men racing towards them. But they were Turks, and true to their traditions. Snatching up whatever weapons they could lay hands on, they rallied in front of their guns to meet the charge.

Scud Smith and Roger were almost equally fleet of foot, and they were both some yards in advance of the troopers. It happened that Roger's path brought him face to face with the officer in charge of the near side gun. The Turk flashed his revolver at him. The bullet grazed his neck; but he was scarcely conscious of it, and neither swerved nor checked his pace. And at this moment of headlong rush and overmastering excitement, his inexperience blinded him to the proper use of the revolver in his hand. Instead of firing it—for the Turk's shot had already given the alarm—he hurled it at



THE DASH FOR THE GUNS.

the officer's head, just as he was aiming for a second shot. There was only a yard or two between them. The weapon struck the Turk full on the brow, and he fell like a log.

Meanwhile the rest of the party were furiously engaged. Captain Smith had dropped his man; the troopers' lances were more than a match for the nondescript weapons hastily seized by the gunners; and within two minutes of the sound of the whistle the platform and the guns were captured, and the only two of the gunners who had not fallen were in full flight-bolting instinctively towards the nearest supports-their main body at the barrage. But they never reached them, for, acting on instructions previously given, the four Arabs who had accompanied Yusuf to Bagdad, together with some of their comrades from the cave, had posted themselves in ambush on the expected line of flight.

Every detail of the night's operations, so far as foresight had availed, had been threshed out by the captain and Roger during their prolonged consultation in the cave. Their object was not merely to capture the guns, certainly not to render them useless, but to convey them and their ammunition to the diz. It was now a ques-

tion of speed. They were nearer to the rock than the Turks by perhaps a quarter of a mile. The daylight was still so wan that the enemy would probably not yet have perceived what had happened. But the alarm must have been given by the artillery officer's shot; the staff officers, no doubt asleep at the moment of the attack, would soon be roused, and would level their field-glasses at the scene; in a few minutes an overwhelming mass of troops would come pouring out of the defile.

All this had been foreseen. Captain Smith, Roger, and Jemadar Muhammad Khan each had his allotted part. The Arabs, too, both those on the diz and those in the basin, were fully instructed in their respective duties.

From the platform of the diz the attack on the guns had been clearly seen. The moment it was proved to be successful, a number of the garrison swarmed down their ropes, and rushed to the derricks which the enemy had thoughtfully provided for their own use. Attaching ropes to these, they hauled them to the foot of the rock, and began to hoist them to the platform, assisted in this work by their comrades from the other side of the basin, when they had disposed of the fugitive gunners.

202 THE CAPTURE OF THE GUNS

Meanwhile Captain Smith, with a few of his troopers who had had training in gunnery, stood by the guns on their platform, and Roger lined up the rest, including those who had been left in reserve, in a favourable

position on the cliff.

The Arabs had only just commenced their task with the derricks when the expected counter-attack was launched. From the southern end of the defile, hard by the barrage, the head of a column could be seen about to debouch into the basin. The captain had already ranged the guns on to the narrow opening, and the enemy was instantly welcomed with a couple of shells. At the same time, at Roger's command, the troopers above fired a scattered volley. The mouth of the defile was at once obscured with smoke and dust. For the moment the Turks recoiled: at any rate, none could be seen to emerge from the smother caused by the rapid shell-fire of the two pieces. This answered to the calculations of the Englishmen. Ignorant as the Turks must be of the provenance of the sudden attack, they might possibly suppose at first that it was a dash by Asker's men, come up secretly over the hills. But they would be awakened from this delusion as soon as they found

shells plunging among them, and bullets from rifles in the hands of men better trained than the Arabs. Uncertain of the composition of the force opposed to them, they would naturally pause until they had employed scouts or other means to test its strength.

But another attack was in the meantime developing at the northern end of the defile. There the smaller enemy force, much remoter from the scene of the surprise, and unaware of what had actually happened, began to move towards the basin, where at any rate their comrades were engaged with some unknown foe, and here Jemadar Muhammad Khan was equal to the occasion. Yusuf had led the jemadar to a spot near the entrance of the defile where, under cover of rocks and scrub, he could post his men in ambush in anticipation of the enemy's movement. As soon as the Turkish outposts began to make their appearance, they were met by a well-directed volley from the concealed troopers. At almost the same moment a shell dropped a few yards ahead of them. Captain Smith had perceived their advance, and being for the time satisfied that the southern force was brought to a standstill, he had trained one of the guns

on the northern, too hurriedly, however, to get the exact range. The enemy, disconcerted at finding a well-concealed force immediately in their front, and still more demoralized when they saw themselves the target for their own guns, hurriedly fell back. The natural deduction of their commander was that by some mysterious means the basin had fallen into the hands of an enemy who was presumably acting in concert with a force outside. He had no means at present of discovering the truth, for he could not communicate with the main body at the barrage except by signals, which owing to the rock could not be clearly seen.

Captain Smith was careful to prolong this state of uncertainty in both forces by dropping an occasional shell at each end of the defile—not rashly, for he wished to husband his ammunition. He was well aware that the facts would be discovered sooner or later: his aim was to hold the enemy up just so long as was necessary to allow the work at the diz to be completed.

There the derricks had now been hoisted to the platform. While the captain kept up a slowly recurring fire with one gun on the southern end of the defile, with the object rather of maintaining the curtain of smoke than of damaging the enemy, some of his troopers hauled the other gun across the basin to the foot of the diz, which gave them cover from the force at the northern end. Others made several journeys with the shells. The gun and ammunition were hauled up by means of the derricks to the platform, and thence conveyed to the flat top of the rock. As soon as it was in position there, the gunners opened fire on the barrage, to keep the enemy's attention occupied while the other gun was being brought to the same spot. All the time Roger and the jemadar held their men ready to come into action if the enemy showed any sign of attacking.

When the guns had been safely placed, the piles of scaling ladders, gun-shields, and other articles which Yusuf and Roger had not been able to distinguish the night before, were similarly hauled to the summit of the rock. Last of all the men ascended, the withdrawal of Muhammad Khan's party being covered by the guns.

The last man having been drawn up, after several hours of the most strenuous work in which any of them had ever been engaged, Captain Smith had a moment's leisure to take stock of his losses. Two

men had been wounded in the attack on the guns, not counting Roger, though his neck bore for some weeks the graze scored by the Turk's revolver bullet. One man had been killed and three wounded in the short engagement at the northern end of the defile; one was injured in drawing the guns up the rock.

"Very light costs, old man," said the captain, sitting with Roger on the parched grass that covered the summit of the diz. "Jemadar, see that the wounded use their field dressings properly, and order the naik to arrange for tiffin. . . . In fact, Rags, it

seems too good to be true."

"It means the D.S.O. for you, Scud, for

a certainty."

"Your name will have to go in too. Oh! bad luck! I forgot you're not one of us. Nobody'd ever think so. How did you feel in your first experience of fire?"

It was then that Roger made answer as

related above.

"Yes, it's odd how differently the same conditions affect different men," the captain continued. "I remember I was in a frightful stew before my first action: wondered if I'd show funk, and all sorts of horrors. Yet when the moment came I had absorbed.

lutely no feeling at all. Honestly, I wasn't conscious of anything but the fact that it was my job to lead the men. Jenkinson, a fellow in another troop, told me that all he felt was annoyance because his belt was twisted!... However, you'll get a commission at once: the D.S.O. will come later."

"You're a regular optimist, Scud! How are we going to get away from this place? The enemy have only to sit tight: what

then?"

"Sufficient unto the day, my boy. All I know at the present moment is that we've done a jolly good day's work, that I want a bath, and a good square meal to follow. Let's see what that Yusuf of yours can do."

CHAPTER XV

SHORT COMMONS

IT was natural enough that the two young Englishmen should be elated at the success of their stroke, in which audacity and calculation had played an equal part. The Arabs, too, showed their delight by the frequency and fervency of their ejaculations. The Indians, more sober in outward expression, were none the less filled with quiet satisfaction.

But when the excitement had had time to abate, and Captain Smith held what he called a council of war with Roger, Yusuf, and Jemadar Muhammad Khan, things presented not quite so rosy a hue. The diz, it was true, had been saved from falling into enemy hands; it was now stronger than ever, by the two guns snatched from the Turks and the considerable reinforcements its garrison had received. But the officers wondered whether it would not prove to be a sort of giant's robe to them.

"It seems to be a case of 'here we are, here we stay,'" said Smith. "We are no nearer getting back to our own lines than before."

"That is the milk in the nutshell," said the jemadar, who was always delighted to have opportunities of practising English.

"Or shall we say the fly in amber, or the gilt off the gingerbread?" the captain suggested. "To use another figure, we are marooned. Unlike those lucky mariners we read of, we haven't a large and fertile island at our disposition, where bread grows on the trees, meat is to be had for the catching, and palms yield a pleasant substitute for lemonade."

"Oh dear!" sighed Roger. "You always fancied yourself at the essay. Well, forge ahead: I don't mind; but for goodness 'sake don't talk about lemonade!"

"What is our friend Yusuf's report on the food question?" Smith went on, ignoring the interruption. "I envy your ability to converse with him in his own tongue, Burnet."

Roger asked Yusuf the question.

"By the Beard, Aga, we are in a great strait," replied the Arab. "There are here twenty of my master's men, besides his wife and certain other women, and a few small children born to him, as you know, in his old age. For these there is food enough and to spare for months, but lo! we have now these warriors from Hindustan, tall men and of great vigour, who will eat like ravening wolves."

"Many years ago, Yusuf, men such as these offered to live on the water their

English masters' rice was boiled in."

"Wallah! They were men of little understanding."

"But great love."

"Perchance they were dervishes like the friend of Firouz Ali. Do you remember how in the khan he said: 'Abstinence is good for the soul'? Verily our souls may profit, but before many weeks our bodies will be dust."

"Really, you ought to translate as you go along," said Smith. "What does it come to?"

"That with our increased numbers we shall face starvation in a few weeks."

"We must put 'em all on rations at once, then. Jemadar, you had better take stock. Mr. Burnet will explain to the Arab that it's not mere inquisitiveness, but sheer necessity." "The mother of invention, sahib."

"In this case an inventory, jemadar."

The jemadar looked puzzled: the word

was not in his English vocabulary.

"Anyhow," Smith continued, "our invention will be pretty well taxed to hold this place against the enemy, keep ourselves alive on short commons, and get back to our own lines. It seems to me it can't be done."

"What are the chances of our forces

getting a move on?" asked Roger.

"And relieving us, you mean? I don't know. Things didn't look very promising when I left. We weren't strong enough to force the Turks' entrenchments, and outflanking was impossible. Of course a successful move northward would relieve us at once, and our hold of this rock, dominating the lines of communication, would immensely facilitate the co-operation of the Russian left with our right."

"Just like a book, old man. But seriously,

you don't see much chance of it?"

"Frankly, I don't. We're fairly boxed."

"And I expect we shall have a pretty warm time. The Turks are sure to bring up some more guns and pepper us."

"That doesn't disturb me much. This

is not a house, or even a church, to be smashed over our heads. I fancy we should be pretty secure in those vaults below; and if they tried to assault, we'd give a good account of ourselves. Of course continual bombardment wouldn't be pleasant, but the bark would be worse than the bite."

"Unless they brought up heavy guns. Wouldn't they pulverize the whole place?"

"I'm afraid they would, in time. Everything depends on how much importance they attach to the possession of the rock. It wouldn't be much good to them if they turned it into a dust-heap. I don't fancy they'll try heavies. Well, to come to the point: I see nothing for it but to hold on here as long as we can in the hope that something will turn up."

"As said Mr. Micawber," remarked the

jemadar eagerly.

"You've an astonishing acquaintance with English literature, jemadar," said Smith.

Muhammad Khan smiled with gratification; and the captain broke off the meeting.

During the next few days the operations of the enemy gave them no time to look far ahead. In the darkness of the first night the Turks placed two more guns on the platform where the first two had been, and

at dawn began to bombard. A considerable force of infantry, also, had assembled in the basin, and through his field-glasses Smith saw men busy in the copse, no doubt making more scaling ladders to replace those they had lost. Moreover, it was clear that they had discovered the avenue by which the captors of the guns had entered the basin. They were seen at the gap in the wall of the conduit, and the Englishmen, from their perch on the summit of the diz, caught sight of Turks here and there on the hills, probably scouting to find out whether there was a larger hostile force in the neighbourhood. They would hardly believe that the small party of Lancers they had seen had attempted so hazardous a coup unsupported.

The new bombardment was soon checked. While the gunners below were unable to drop their shells on the summit of the rock, the captured guns there dominated the whole outer area of the basin, and Smith's men, after a few sighting shots, knocked the enemy's guns clean out of action. The infantry were in no better position. They could not hit the garrison: on the other hand the Lancers were able to snipe them at their ease, unless they came immediately

beneath the shelter of the rock. There was no object in their doing this at present, for an assault in force was impossible until they had found a means of reaching the platform. Even then, the well-armed men above, so long as their ammunition lasted, would have no difficulty in beating off the attacks of many times their number. It appeared to be a case of stalemate: the besiegers could make no effective move, the defenders were unable to release themselves.

After two or three days the enemy ceased their activity, and remained in their encampments, using the gap in the landslide as an observation post. The Englishmen conjectured that the pause would last only until heavy guns or howitzers had been brought up. Emplacements might be found for these on the low hills to the west, or even on the plain beyond; and when they came into play, the summit of the diz, at any rate, would be at their mercy.

But several more days passed, and still there was no sign of heavy artillery. This was incomprehensible to the Englishmen. They did not know the straits to which the Turks were reduced at this time through the pressure of the Russians along almost the whole of the Eastern front. Every available gun was needed to meet the Russians, or to prepare to meet the British force that lay inactive but grimly tenacious and a continual menace in its lines below Kut. There was probably none to spare at present for the capture of an isolated position, which, valuable as it might prove in the course of subsequent operations, was not at present in the actual arena, and must soon fall under stress of famine.

That the capture of the place still counted in the enemy's calculations was shown one day by the passage of an aeroplane. Its hum was heard long before it came in sight, and Captain Smith searched the sky intently through his glasses. "'Ware bombs!" he called as soon as he saw it. Everyone left the summit for the inner chambers below, where they heard the crash of bombs exploding in the basin. None hit the rock itself until the aeroplane passed over in its return flight at a much lower altitude. Then a hole was made in the summit, but no damage was done.

"The observer must have had a particularly useless flight," remarked Smith. "He could see nothing but a bare flat field."

At the end of the second week the Englishmen felt thoroughly bored and not a little

uneasy. Smith was troubled about the wounded men left behind in the cave, though Yusuf assured him that they would be well tended by the Arabs, who had without doubt seen from the watch-post on the hill that the diz was still in the hands of their friends, and would await release in patience. But a worse trouble was the steady diminution of the food supply. The spring and the huge rain tanks gave plenty of water; but there was no means of replenishing the stock of food. The spectre of famine, at first remote and dim, loomed from day to day more real and menacing.

"Look here!" said Roger one day. "I am fed up with this. Why shouldn't I slip away one night, and try to get through to the British lines? I know the country pretty well; I speak the languages; and you saw for yourself that I can pass for a

native."

"But what's the good, man? Our people are stuck below Kut, and there's no earthly chance that they'll move an hour before they're ready for the sake of a squadron of Lancers. I expect we were posted as missing long ago, and are clean forgotten by this time."

[&]quot;Oh! come now, don't disparage your

friends. I don't know what the General will do or won't do; all the same, I think he ought to know the position here, and as we haven't wireless, or an aeroplane, or a carrier pigeon, the only means of communication is what someone called a biped without feathers."

"Then send one of the Arabs."

"I had thought of that, but, with all respect to Yusuf—who'd be proud of it, by the way—the Arabs are such liars that the General would pooh-pooh his story and suspect him of trying to lead him into a trap."

"I could write him a note. 'Sir, I have

the honour to report,' and so on."

"And if the Arab was collared, the show would be given away. No: if it's to be done, I'd better do it. I admit the risks. If I escaped the Turks, I might be nabbed by the Lurs, though a solitary basket-maker, or a harmless lunatic—I could feign that at a pinch—"

"No need to feign!"

"My dear chap, you've fairly got 'em. D'you remember what we did at school one day when you had the blues?"

"I should think I do! You and Tibby Stevens—my word! I shall never forget how I yelled with laughter. Rags, you really are a tactful person: that recollection is as good as a tonic. . . . But hadn't you better take Yusuf?"

"Don't think so. The fewer the better

in a job of this sort."

"I suppose you know best. But how in the world will you get away? The defile is blocked at each end. You'd hardly evade the enemy's outposts westward; besides, you couldn't possibly scale the precipitous sides of the basin. It's hopeless."

"My idea was to go by way of the conduit, but, of course, the beggars are using the only entrance as an observation post: at least, I suppose they use it by night as well as by day. I'd forgotten that. Couldn't you shell 'em out?"

"They'd only suspect we had something

on. So that's the end of that."

"I don't know. I'll see what Yusuf says about it."

Upon the matter being put to Yusuf, he at once declared that the scheme was impossible. There was no other exit.

"Couldn't I get up the cliffs by means of

scaling ladders?"

"Would you climb to the moon, Aga?" Allowing for Oriental exaggeration, Roger

nevertheless had to admit that to scale the overhanging cliffs by ladders of the kind made by the Turks would be a very perilous undertaking. But he was determined to try his luck; he might fail, but with due precautions he would avoid the only danger he feared - the danger of falling.

"I am going to see what I can do to fasten two ladders firmly together," he said.

"We can test their strength here."

"By the beard of the Prophet (upon whom be blessing and peace!), is not obedience better than the fat of rams? Shall it be told Asker that Yusuf is not a faithful servant?"

Roger looked at the Arab in surprise, puzzled to find a connection between this outburst and the subject of their discussion.

"Behold, I have kept a seal upon my lips these many years," Yusuf continued. "All that my master bade me, that have I done. But in truth he said, 'Keep silence until the hour comes when great is the need.' Is not our need great?"

"You hesitate about breaking a promise?

What was it?"

"On my head be it! Know then, Aga, that long years ago, on a day when I hunted wild goats in the hills, I came by chance upon a place whence the way of escape to the hills is open, albeit long and toilsome. And when I told it to my master Asker, he bade me hold my peace until the hour of need. Is not that hour at hand? Will not my master's wrath be turned away?"

"I am very sure he would consent to

your disclosure, did he know."

"Then I will lead you to the place, and go with you to your journey's end."

"You could show me the way, and then

return."

"Nay, the way cannot be traversed alone, and were I to go I could not return. Wherefore also no man can pursue us."

"Very well, then. For several reasons I wished to go alone, but I own I shall be glad of your company. Now, when shall

we start? To-night?"

Yusuf explained that the passage of the hills could not safely be attempted by night. On the other hand, to cross the basin in broad daylight would be to run the gaunt-let of the enemy's snipers. It was finally decided that they should leave the rock in the early dawn, while the dark was still deep enough partially to cloak their movements. They would thus have the daylight

hours in which to accomplish that part of their journey which nature had made dangerous, and arrive by nightfall in the country of the Lurs, where darkness would protect them from the danger of hostile men.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ROPE'S END

GLOOM still shrouded the basin, though the hill-tops were edged with the flush of dawn, when twenty of the best marksmen among the Lancers posted themselves on the platform to cover the departure. It was on the side farthest from the barrage, and invisible there, but in full view from the enemy's observation post at the break in the landslide.

The two men came forward. They wore the uniform of Turkish cavalry.

"Good luck!" said Smith, grasping Roger's hand.

Yusuf descended first by the rope, Roger a few seconds after. The latter had just reached the ground when a bullet plonked against the rock close beside him. A sniper in the observation post had opened fire. Before he could shoot again, a dozen bullets from the platform riddled his hiding-place, and he troubled no more.

The rope had been thrown down after

Roger's descent. Yusuf rapidly coiled it over his arm, and started swiftly towards the cliffs on the north-east. Before the two had covered fifty yards, another sniper, posted near the mouth of the defile, tried his hand, and had fired three shots, without hitting, before he too was located and silenced.

Taking advantage of all the sparse cover that the ground afforded, the envoys hastened their steps, until they reached a narrow twisted fissure in the cliff, so inconspicuous that to Smith, following their progress through his glasses, they appeared to disappear into the solid rock. From the diz, indeed, the opening was distinguishable only when lit up by the setting sun. It was very shallow, a mere scratch on the surface. The ground at the foot of the cliff was covered with loose shale that had peeled off the sides. Up this they scrambled on hands and knees for about a hundred feet, and thence on to a ledge, a yard in width, that bent round the shoulder of the hill. Here, no longer in sight from the basin, they paused for a short rest.

The ledge in many places gave but a precarious foothold; in parts it was wholly broken away. Roger did not like the look

of it. He was not a mountaineer, and the idea of springing across these gaps above a sheer precipice was somewhat alarming. But he was soon reassured. Yusuf took out his long knife, and bending a little forward over the first gap, dug holes for their hands and feet out of the sandstone. Bridging the gaps by this means they safely traversed the ledge, which brought them to a practicable

slope up the hill.

The next two hours' work, Roger thought, would have been good practice for climbing the Alps. Such clambering as he had previously done in Yusuf's company was child's play compared with it. There were no ravines deep enough to be dangerous, but scarcely a yard of the ground was level. It was like walking, or rather sprawling, among solid waves. As the morning advanced and the heat increased, travelling became a form of torture. Less accustomed than Yusuf. Roger often had to scramble on hands and knees at places where the Arab went erect. And when at last the way became smoother, and they had reached a spot from which the diz could be seen, Roger saw with bitter disappointment that the distance they had come could not be more than a mile, as the crow flies.

From this point, however, the climb, though steep, was comparatively easy, and in another two hours they came to the scene of Yusuf's adventure of by-gone days.

"It is good that we rest a while," said Yusuf. "By my father's eyes, we are now

come to the brink of destruction."

"You don't want to frighten me?" said

Roger.

"Wallah! Do not I know that you have the heart of a lion? What is fear? Is it not the child of ignorance? and the shadow of a mole-hill? He that looks up into the spaces of the sky, and measures the span of a man's life—truly he may tremble with great awe; but if he looks upon the earth whereof he is made, is it not as though he looked with love upon his mother's face?"

This was novel philosophy to Roger, and he ruminated on it as he sat silent by the Arab's side.

They had come to a spot where the hill broke away into a sheer precipice resembling the almost perpendicular cliffs of the basin. Some twenty-five feet below them, however, a broad platform jutted out from the face of the hill. On this grew a few trees, which no doubt maintained their existence by

favour of the soil washed down from the

height above.

"It was there that I caught the goat that had escaped me," said Yusuf. "Look down upon it, Aga. Then, when we have eaten a little of the food in my wallet, and taken a draught from my goatskin, we will descend."

Presently he arose, doubled the rope around a slender rocky boulder that stood embedded near the edge of the cliff, and let himself down on to the platform. Roger followed him, wondering what his purpose could be, for the platform apparently led nowhere, and Yusuf had now pulled the rope down.

"How did you get up again?" he asked.

"On that day, Aga, I had a companion, who remained by the rock. We had no stout hempen rope such as this, but we fashioned one of creeping plants we found in the hills. And when I had caught the goat, by the help of my friend I came again to his side, and the goat also. But now we cannot return; did I not say that I must come with you to your journey's end? It is as when men die: they go and come not again."

This was not exactly cheering; but Roger

knew Yusuf well enough to trust him thoroughly.

"Moreover," the Arab continued, "we need the rope for our further descent. Clasp your hands about this tree, and look down."

When Roger did so, he found himself gazing into a chasm of incalculable depth, extending dark and mysterious into the bowels of the hill. The opposite side, fifty or sixty feet below the spot on which he stood, was covered with small stout trees. If a plumb line had been let fall from the edge of the platform, it would have been about ten feet from the brink of the chasm, the nearer wall of which could not be seen. It was obvious that, beneath the platform, the face of the precipice curved inward.

Roger wondered more and more. Had the opposite edge of the chasm been on a level with the platform, the latter was broad enough to give a run that would have made a ten-foot leap an easy achievement. But it was nearly sixty feet below!

Yusuf's preparations soon showed how he intended to solve the problem, and the solution caused Roger once more to reflect on his friend's definition of fear. He was conscious of that strange cold trickle down the spine that afflicts a small boy when he visits the headmaster's study for his first

swiping.

The Arab firmly attached one end of the rope to the trunk of the tree near the edge of the platform. At the other end he made a loop wide enough to hold one foot. Then he asked Roger to lower him over the brink.

Roger might have expostulated but for his confidence in Yusuf, and his self-pride: Yusuf must not suspect him of the least shade of fear. But it was not pleasant to see in anticipation the stalwart frame dangling over the bottomless chasm. Supporting himself by the tree, he slowly paid out the rope. When stretched to its full extent, its end, in which Yusuf had looped his foot, was still a considerable distance above the level of the ground on the opposite side.

And then, watching with anxious intentness, Roger saw his friend begin to swing himself backwards and forwards over the gaping chasm beneath him. Little by little the length of the arc he described increased, and Roger felt giddy when he noticed that he was rotating as well as swaying to and fro.

Presently he touched the nearest tree



"MASHALLAH!"

that grew on the opposite side, its branches rising to the height of some thirty feet above the ground. He swung back, and being carried a little higher on the upward return, he clutched at the nearest branch. But the oscillation of the rope twisted him out of reach at the critical moment. Once more he passed over the mouth of the chasm; again he flung out his arm as he rose; this time he got a grip, but again the rotating rope prevented him from confirming his hold. Roger, tingling with excitement, held his breath. He dreaded lest dizziness should overcome the Arab before he had achieved success. How many times he failed to hold, how many he missed altogether! It seemed an unendurable hour of suspense before he at last caught and held the branch, and let the rope go.

"Mashallah!" he piously ejaculated.

"My turn now!" thought Roger, quivering.

There was no one to let him down. He must swarm down without assistance. It was a feat he would not have thought twice about in the school gymnasium; but the yawning gulf beneath him might well give pause, even to the least timid. There was Yusuf, however, sitting astride the branch,

his features set in their usual grave expression, as apparently unconcerned as though the perilous act was a matter of daily routine. He had lopped off a thin straight branch three or four feet long, and was trimming away its twigs.

Roger bethought himself of a plan by which he might get rid of the danger of slipping as he climbed down the rope. Drawing this up, he knotted it at intervals. Then he began the descent. Given confidence by the knots, he felt no particular tremors until he had come low enough to insert his foot into the loop. Then he had a moment of panic, for the loose end of the rope evaded him. So far he had not bent his eyes downward: he wanted to forget that dark pit beneath. But now, with a strong effort at self-command, he deliberately looked down and managed to place his foot in the loop. From that moment he was at ease. The rest of the task was much less difficult than it had been in Yusuf's case, for as he swung upward, the Arab held out towards him the short pole he had cut for the purpose. By grasping this he lessened the rotation of the rope, and as his swing lengthened, Yusuf was able to assist him in getting a grip on an adjacent branch. Sitting there among the leaves he watched the rope fall back and twirl like a snake above the chasm. It seemed like a dream.

"Mashallah!" quoth Yusuf. "Did not my heart tell me that you knew no fear?"

Roger smiled. "He couldn't see how I felt inside," he thought, as he lay down on the ground.

"It's midday, Yusuf," he said. "We

have earned our rest."

The perils of the hills were over. From the spot at which they had arrived it was a comparatively easy, though a long, descent to the plains. The dangers that were now likely to beset them were of a different kind. Towards evening, after a few hours' uneventful progress over the upper slopes, they came in sight of a Lur encampment, and turned into a small wood to hide until darkness. There they drew once more upon their modest stock of provisions, and snatched a brief rest, to prepare for the long road before them.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE RISING OF THE MOON

The region at which the two adventurers had now arrived was between fifty and sixty miles north-by-east from the British lines below Kut-el-Amara, measured as the crow flies. It was some 1200 ft. above sea-level, and the rest of the way was continuously down-hill until they should reach the plain, and then monotonously level.

There were two risks still to be considered. During the summer months the nomad Lurs lived in the hills, only descending into the plain with the approach of winter. They are the fiercest highwaymen and freebooters of the Persian border, and the Turkish uniform would be no protection to the travellers: it would rather invite interference, for two Turkish soldiers might be worth robbing. If this danger were escaped, there remained a further peril in crossing the plain, where there would be fewer opportunities of hiding, and more

likelihood, as they went south, of encountering genuine Turks or tribes in their pay. The plain was now scorched and bare, which was in one respect fortunate, for many of the villages would be deserted. On the other hand, there would probably be no little difficulty in obtaining food.

Captain Smith had given Roger a general idea of the positions held by the Turkish forces on both sides of the river, and Yusuf considered that the safest course was to work along the lower slopes of the hills until they reached a point where they could overlook the marshes north of Kut which had prevented the British from undertaking an effective flanking movement. They could then judge, perhaps, the length of the detour that would be necessary in order to gain safely the extreme right of the British lines just north of the river.

It would be tedious to recount the details of the travellers' slow progress during the next three days, or rather nights. With no guides but the stars they could not cover more than ten or fifteen miles a night, and they had often to diverge from the direct course in order to avoid villages or encampments. They suffered much from hunger and thirst: Yusuf could only procure food

by stealth, and keeping away from the villages meant keeping away from the wells. The small water-skins they carried were often empty: when they were full, the contents, obtained at some rare pool, were often such as would throw a conscientious M.O. into convulsions. Roger felt that only his long residence in Mesopotamia could have rendered him proof against this putrid water. There were enough fever-germs in a thimble-full of it to kill a newly arrived European in a few hours.

It happened, towards dawn on the fourth morning, when they were on the point of halting for their usual day's rest and hiding, that Yusuf slipped in descending a sharp incline, and fell to the ground. He was up again in a moment, and walked on until he had discovered a suitable resting-place. Roger supposed that he had suffered no injury. He made no complaint, and went off on his nightly prowl for food. But when he returned, just as dawn was stealing in, Roger noticed that he limped.

"Ahi!" he exclaimed. "I have but a pumpkin and a few roots. The folk in the village yonder were early astir, and I dared

not stay longer."

"Perhaps they will last us. I think I

heard a gun just now, so we must be getting near the end of our journey," said Roger. "But let me look at your foot."

"It is nothing, Aga."

But Roger soon saw that his friend's marching was over for the present. His ankle was inflamed and swollen; stoical as he was, he winced when Roger touched it.

This was serious. Yusuf, though he knew the country, could not tell to a mile or two how much further they had to go, nor could he give Roger definite directions for the rest of the journey. They were both weary, and enfeebled by their privations, and Yusuf being the forager, it seemed that they must suffer still more unless Roger undertook the task of procuring food. Roger bathed the injured limb, and bound it up, hoping that after the day's rest Yusuf would find himself able to go on, even though more slowly than ever.

But when night came, the Arab found it impossible to walk. There was nothing for it but to wait through another day, though both food and water were running short.

When morning broke, Roger determined to leave their hiding-place and try to discover their whereabouts. The intermittent sound of gun-fire proved that they were

within at most a few miles of their objective, and it might be possible for him to proceed alone, and send back help for his friend.

He had not gone more than a few hundred paces when, on the plain below him, he caught sight of a man in Arab dress, mounted on an ass, riding along a track that appeared to skirt the edge of a tract of marshland. This, thought Roger, must be the Suwaicha marsh that extended for some fifteen miles along the left bank of the Tigris, and at the eastern angle of which lay the extreme right of the British entrenchments.

He slipped under cover as soon as he saw the rider, but too late to escape observation. The man paused, waited a moment or two, then turned his ass and rode back at a clumsy gallop in the direction from which he had come. Roger watched him until he disappeared in the far distance round the corner of a small palm grove.

Roger considered. Why had the man ridden back? Had his momentary glimpse of a Turkish uniform caused him to change his course? Where had he come from? Whither was he returning? The Tigris was not in sight. As far as Roger could see there was nothing but the bare plain and the hills on one side, and the scrub-dotted

marsh on the other and in front. The boom of guns still reached his ears, but there was no smoke on the horizon.

He went back to Yusuf, and told him of the strange incident. Yusuf was troubled.

"Wallahi!" he exclaimed. "We must leave this spot. The man will tell that he has seen a Turk, and the folk hereabout are no friends of the Osmanli."

"Then why need we be troubled? They

may be friends of the English."

"Nay, they love none but themselves. They will come seeking us. We must go once more eastward, even though that will lengthen our journey by many miles."

Assisted by Roger, he managed to crawl along for an hour away from the marsh, until he reached a dry watercourse where he thought it would be safe to spend the rest of the day. As they rested there, he urged Roger to go on alone when night fell. Having sighted the marsh, he could not fail in his general direction. The Tigris was probably not more than ten miles away, and the only thing he had to fear was that by going a little too far to the west he might be seen by a Turkish patrol, or stumble unawares upon the Turkish entrenchments instead of the British.

Roger had already had the idea of making the rest of the journey alone, but that was before there was any threat of immediate danger. If the rider of the ass had indeed ridden back to acquaint his tribe of the presence of a Turk, Yusuf, helpless as he was, would have little chance of escaping them. Even if he did, he would perish for lack of food.

It was a perplexing problem. Roger reminded himself of his mission, on the success of which hung the lives of the holders of the diz and the important military considerations which the retention of the fortress might involve. He might, with luck, accomplish that mission; but could he abandon his faithful companion? Ignorant of the exact distance between him and the British lines, he felt that, even if he reached them, and was able to send Yusuf assistance, it might come too late.

During that day Yusuf tried more than once to persuade Roger to leave him, but Roger postponed his decision: in any case he would not go before night. And then circumstances solved the problem for him.

They had come to the end of their food and water. Whatever he might decide, Yusuf and himself must have the means of subsistence, and since the former was no longer fit to act as forager, Roger must for the nonce assume that rôle. Soon after dark, therefore, he left their shelter in the watercourse and stole towards a hamlet which they had seen in the distance. The sky was starry, and he had no difficulty in finding his way. When he first came in sight of the low irregular houses and the palms behind them, there were sounds indicating that the people were still awake, and he sat down to wait until all was quiet. Then he went stealthily forward. In the starlight he easily found the village well on the outskirts, dropped his skins into it with the ropes kept there, and noiselessly filled them. From a field close by he gathered two or three melons-not very nutritious food, but still something to go on with. Laden with his spoils, and congratulating himself on his success, he cautiously made his retreat from the village.

It was not far to the spot where he had left Yusuf, but going and returning in the dark are different things. To wander a little from his direct course was inevitable. When he had walked, as he thought, long enough, in order to discover Yusuf's position he gave the low cry of an owl which the

Arab was accustomed to employ as a signal when returning from similar forays. There was no answer. He repeated the call, and this again evoking no response he went on a few paces, beginning to fear that he had seriously miscalculated his direction.

Again he halted, and again uttered the cry. And then, so suddenly that he had no time to drop his burdens and attempt to resist, there was a rush of feet, and he was helpless in the grasp of several men.

A few minutes afterwards Roger, with Yusuf, who had been captured previously, was dragged before the headman of the settlement. He was an old and venerable figure, and sat in his little house, fingering his beard and watching the prisoners keenly by the light of an oil lamp as their captors recited the charge against them, and pointed to the incriminating melons. They were left in no doubt as to the origin of their misfortune. The headman had been informed by a travelling dervish that Turkish soldiers were in the neighbourhood, and had ordered a watch to be set for them.

It happened that he nourished a long and bitter hatred of the Turks. In a revolt many years before, members of his family had been killed, or taken prisoner and then barbarously murdered by the orders of the Pasha of Bagdad. And now that chance had thrown into his hands two helpless captives of the same race, he had no scruples in wreaking on them a long-delayed vengeance.

The charge was no sooner stated than sentence was pronounced. The prisoners were not asked for their defence.

"Let them be taken out when the moon is high, and stripped of their uniforms," said the old man. "Then six of my young men shall cast a spear each. The garments of these evil-doers shall be divided among those that seized them. Whatever else they may bear upon them shall be mine. And as to the melons, let them be restored to the man to whom they belong. Thus shall justice be done."

"Wallah!" Yusuf here broke forth. "Is it justice to condemn before the case is heard?"

"Silence!" cried the old man. "There are the melons: they witness against you. What need of words?"

"By the Beard, it is true that we took those few melons, but shall a man suffer death for so little? And moreover, we are not Turks, as it may seem, but—"

"Hold your peace, vile one! Would you save your skins by speaking lies? Do I not know too well those garments? Turks you may not be by blood, but Turks you are by adoption. If you have deserted from the army of the Osmanli you deserve death; if you have not, then are you spies upon my people, and again deserve death. Death is your portion. Away with them!"

The old man was obviously so angry that further words would have been wasted on him at that moment. Roger, who felt more interested than alarmed, signed to Yusuf to say no more. He thought that presently, when the old man had cooled down, a few words of tactful explanation from himself might bring him to see reason. And as the sentence was not to be carried out until the moon was high, there were two or three hours to spare—"time enough for the old gentleman to get over it," he said to himself.

It was some minutes before the seriousness of the situation came home to him. Then he realized it with a sense of shock. He was to die. How impossible it seemed! These vigorous limbs were to be stilled; these eyes that looked out upon the world with so much interest were to be for ever

244 AT THE RISING OF THE MOON

dimmed; this "self" of his, compact of the experience of nineteen joyous years, was to come to a sudden end, or to undergo some unimaginable transformation. "Well, I've had a good time," he thought. "One must die some time or other, and after all, it's better to die young and strong than to grow old and feeble and become a nuisance. All the same, I don't want to die yet, and not this way, anyhow. I'd rather make a fight for it. Perhaps there'll be a chance yet."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PRICE OF A TALE

The news of the capture of two Turkish soldiers had run through the little village, and the male portion of the community had left their beds to feast their curiosity. Yusuf and Roger were soon the centre of a group of spectators. They were not locked up, but held under guard in the open yard about which the headman's house was built. The Arabs squatted against the walls on three sides, smoking their pipes, and awaiting the moment when the rising moon should give light enough for the execution of their chief's sentence.

Before many minutes had passed the headman, whose age was great, began to nod.

"Ahi!" he exclaimed, yawning. "Where is that dervish Hezar? Has he not come to see the dogs about whom he told us? Let someone rouse him and bid him entertain us. He is a man of strange conceits, and

will perform marvels that will keep slumber from our eyes."

A man left the group and passed out of the vard. Roger smiled. The dervishes were great humbugs, as he knew. They wrote talismans at a high price for simpletons; they concocted nauseous draughts for the cure of ailments; they compounded charms of the hair of a lynx, the backbone of an owl, bear's grease and other ingredients: and they practised various tricks of simple magic that would not have deluded an English schoolboy. Roger looked forward to a pleasant last entertainment, though he felt a grudge against the dervish for the plight to which he had been brought. He hoped that the headman, when he had been put into a good humour by the charlatan, might be persuaded to take a more lenient view of the prisoners' trespass.

Presently the messenger returned, followed by the dervish. The light was too dim to reveal more than the outline of the latter's uncouth figure. He salaamed to the headman and then addressed him in a voice that Roger remembered well. Yusuf recognized it also, and whispered to Roger:

"Wallah! It is our friend of the khan. Shall I not speak to him?"

"Wait," Roger whispered back. "Let us see what happens."

The dervish explained that having had a long journey that day he feared he was too weary to afford his host suitable entertainment, but he would do his best.

"Say you so?" answered the headman. "Truly modesty is a becoming virtue; but do we not know that your worst is better than the best of others? Have we not in times past feasted our ears on your marvellous stories? Tell us a story, O holy one, and keep sleep from our eyes until the time is come for these Turkish dogs to die the death."

Squatting on a mat near the old man the dervish related the story of the Prince of Khatai and the Princess of Samarcand, pausing dramatically at the point where, amid rolling thunder, the ogre is about to devour the prince. Yusuf, with the Oriental's extraordinary enjoyment of a fairy tale, forgot his impending fate, and applauded with the rest.

"By the beard of the Prophet (upon whom be blessing and peace!) did I not say truly?" cried the headman. "Lo! here is a man at the point of death; yet, so marvellous a story-teller is the holy one, he is captivated by the tale of the woful

prince."

At this the dervish for the first time appeared to be interested in the prisoners. He glanced at them where they sat in the midst of their guards, and in the growing light Roger was aware that he had been recognized. The sense of safety and wellbeing he had always felt in the presence of this strange person returned to him.

The dervish went on with his story, and when he had related how the Prince of Khatai, by a wonderful feat of dexterity, cut off the ogre's head, he concluded:

"Now, my worthy hearers, it is time for me to claim my fee. Happy am I that my story has pleased you. I do not ask you to open your purses: I ask for what will cost you nothing and yet gratify me. Was it not I that told you of these two dogs of Turks, and thereby enabled your young men to capture them? Behold, they have already paid forfeit with their garments and their arms: these are beyond question yours. But let the two men be mine, and it will be on my head if I turn not the affair to my profit and to yours. It is told me they say they are not Turks. Well! If it be so, I shall discover what they are.

But if indeed they are Turks, then surely the Ingliz will pay well to have them delivered into their hands, and their false speaking will meet its just punishment. Moreover, if the slaying of two men in the garments of Turkish soldiers comes to the ears of the Turks, and they finally prevail over the Ingliz, will they not visit upon you a terrible vengeance? Be it known, also, that whatsoever reward I receive from the Ingliz I will share with you."

This strange proposal was discussed by the headman with his people. The consideration that weighed most with them was that by accepting it they would escape the payment of the fees, by no means light, which the dervish might reasonably have insisted on. Ultimately the headman accepted the arrangement, and the moon that was to have lighted an execution saw the two prisoners accompanying the dervish to his humble lodging.

"Mashallah! This is truly a wonder of wonders," exclaimed Yusuf: "more marvellous than the tale of the Prince of Khatai. It passes my understanding, O holy one. Why, having set these men to seize us, do you now save us out of their hands?"

"The friends of Firouz Ali are my

friends," replied the dervish. "When I saw Burnet Aga this morning I believed indeed that he was a Turkish scout, and set in train your capture in order to deliver you into the hands of the Ingliz."

"But why did you not tell the old chief just now that I am an Englishman?" asked Roger.

"Might he not have suspected a plot between us? You speak Arabic almost as well as I do: he would as soon have believed that I am an Englishman myself. It is better to take simple courses. But tell me; I have been distressed for you: what have been your doings since you left Bagdad? It was said that you were drowned in the Tigris, and though I have sought the basketmaker, to ask tidings of you, I have not found him."

Roger hesitated. Was it wise to tell everything to this wandering dervish? True, he was a friend of Firouz Ali, and had given plain proofs of friendliness towards Roger himself; but Roger felt that the affair of the diz was too important to be confided to anyone but a British officer.

"I will tell you everything when we are safe in the British lines," he said at last.

The dervish smiled, once more surprising Roger: Arabs rarely smiled, and never



AT THE OUTPOST.

with the thoughtful smile he saw on this strange man's face.

"So be it," he said. "There will be

much to tell then."

Early next morning, provided with Arab dress by the villagers, the two friends set out in company with the dervish for the British lines, Yusuf riding the ass. They rested during the hottest hours, and it was nearing sunset before they reached their destination. To Roger's surprise, a word from the dervish franked them past the outposts, and they were led without loss of time to headquarters. Here the dervish went alone into one of the tents. After a few minutes a staff captain came out.

"You are Mr. Burnet?" he said to Roger. "The general wants to see you."

Roger returned with him, and found himself in the presence of several staff officers sitting round a table. The dervish also was seated. Many pairs of eyes were focussed on Roger as he entered.

"Capital!" said the general, smiling. "You make an excellent Arab, Mr. Burnet.

You haven't any baskets to sell?"

"No, sir; but I've a good many eggs in my basket; in other words, I've very important information."

He glanced towards the dervish.

"Mr. Burnet thinks it's not for your ears," said the general to him in English. "You had better leave us now: I'll send him to you presently."

The dervish rose, smiled, and left the tent. Roger was more amazed than ever: the dervish had never given a sign of knowing English.

"He had better tell you his story himself," the general went on. "Meanwhile, what is your news? It is some weeks since you left Bagdad: time enough to pick up a good deal, though whether you can tell me more than I already know from other sources remains to be seen."

"You have news of Captain Smith of the Bengal Lancers?" said Roger, eager to learn whether he had been anticipated.

"Smith! What do you know of him?

Was he killed, captured—what?"

Relieved, in spite of himself, to find that his toilsome and hazardous journey had not been wasted, Roger gave a full account of his adventures and of the position at the diz. The staff officers listened with absorbed interest and scarcely an interruption.

"The strangest story I've heard for many a day," said the general when Roger had concluded. "And I'm vastly indebted to

you, Mr. Burnet. I'm only sorry that as a civilian you're not eligible for a decoration. But I'll send in your name for a commission at once, and meanwhile consider yourself commissioned. If you are not wedded to that Arab dress of yours-it becomes you very well-the quartermaster will no doubt be able to rig you out. Now, go and find your dervish friend: your news will take us a little time to digest; and then I hope you'll give us the pleasure of entertaining you at our mess."

Roger's subsequent conversation with the dervish acquainted him with one of those romances which abound in the byways of British history. Alfred Sanderson, once a lieutenant in the service of the British India Steamship Company, had, like other Englishmen now and in the past, felt the call of the East so deeply that he had resolved to live his life among the people, becoming an Arab as completely as he could. In this determination he was perhaps inspired by the example of certain officers in the Indian navy who, some eighty years ago, might have been seen wandering through the bazars of Bagdad, turbaned, bearded, and happy vagabonds. Having an unusual gift for languages, and a great power of assimilating Oriental traits, Sanderson had for nearly thirty years been accepted as a native in all parts of Mesopotamia. In every place he visited he was always careful to pass himself off as a stranger from a distant province, and so escaped detection through failure to observe small points of custom and ways of life. Becoming acquainted with Firouz Ali, he had thrown himself enthusiastically into that reformer's schemes, and acted as his missionary. On the outbreak of war, he had immediately offered his services to the British Mesopotamian expedition, and had been of immense assistance in gathering information for the headquarters staff.

"Aren't you ever going back to Eng-

land?" asked Roger.

"I don't know," replied Sanderson. "Now and then, at long intervals, I feel an ache for home, more especially lately, since I have met so many of my own countrymen and spoken my own tongue. But I think it likely that I shall remain here. There is much work still to do; and when this unhappy war is over, perhaps we shall have opportunities that we have never had before. That is its only justification: that it will help to regenerate East and West."

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE FOR THE DIZ

Two days later, at dusk, a body of five hundred horse under the command of a major left the British lines and struck off over the plains towards the south-east. After a couple of hours' rapid progress, they swung round to the north-east and travelled at the full speed of their horses, with occasional rests, until the heat of the sun on the following day enforced a more extended halt. Among them was Roger Burnet, now clothed in officer's uniform, but without stars indicating rank. Yusuf, much to his chagrin, had been left behind under the charge of the medical officer.

Another night's forced march brought the party to the hills, not far from the spot where Roger and Yusuf had quitted them ten days before. There the party broke up. Half of them handed over their horses to the rest, who returned by the way they had come. Then, dismounted, they followed

THE BATTLE FOR THE DIZ 257

Roger in the toilsome climb towards the region of the diz. They were heavily laden, carrying the regulation packs, arms, ammunition, and food supply, together with sundry other things the use of which would not have been immediately apparent.

Roger had only his memory and the instructions of Yusuf to guide him. Fortunately his sense of locality and direction was pretty good, and he was able to make his way without many divagations to the ravine which had given him such an anxious five minutes. The rope was still hanging over the middle of the chasm. One of the men hooked in its end, and this having been made fast, he swarmed up to the tree at the edge of the precipice. Then the purpose of one of the odd articles appeared. It was a travelling sling. When this was rigged up, the men with all their belongings were soon hoisted up to the rocky platform.

It was now necessary to scale the precipitous face of the cliff. This had been rendered possible by some of the men who had first crossed the ravine. They had notched holes in the rock, and inserted in them short wooden posts that had formed part of their burdens. After several hours work, only interrupted by the noontide

heat, the whole force was assembled on the hill above.

There were still nearly two hours of daylight left. While the men rested, Roger took Major Henderson and the second in command to a somewhat higher point where they could get a view of the diz and the basin, distant not more than a mile or two in a straight line, though several miles by the only possible route. They had for some time heard the sound of guns. Through their glasses the officers scanned with interest the place that had been their chief topic of conversation during the past two days. It lay clearly visible in the glow of the setting sun. There was evidence of great activity in the basin and beyond the barrage.

"As I thought," said the major. "No mountain guns could have made that row. You see they've a howitzer beyond the south-west corner there. They must have brought it up after you left, Burnet."

The howitzer was methodically pounding the diz. The guns at Captain Smith's disposal were unable to interfere with it.

"I'm not quite sure," the major continued, "but it appears to me there's a zigzag trench running across the basin, ending in a fire trench with a very high

parapet near the rock. Don't you think so, Barker?"

"I think you're right. They have certainly been busy during the last few days. Where is that conduit of yours, Burnet?"

Roger pointed out the position of its mouth, which was somewhat in the shadow cast by the diz. The two officers gazed at it steadily, and noticed that sentries were being relieved, out of sight of the garrison of the diz, the relief men moving cautiously behind rocks that had been piled about the entrance. Major Henderson asked several questions until he had grasped the details of the position, then shut up his glasses, saying:

"We can do no more this evening. Our

next move depends on the sun."

Next morning the officers, rising stiff from their bare bivouac on the hills, waited impatiently for the mist to clear. As soon as the sun's rays were strong enough, they tried to open up heliographic communication with Captain Smith. There was little or no risk of being detected by the enemy, for the summit of the diz and the spot in the hills opposite were both at a considerable height above the forces beyond the basin. It was some time, however, before

260 THE BATTLE FOR THE DIZ

their signals received any answer, and Major Henderson, who was inclined to be testy, became a little annoyed.

"What on earth is the fellow doing?" he

grumbled.

"The top of the diz can't be a very healthy place when the howitzer gets to work," suggested Captain Barker. "Ah! there you are at last."

An answering flash had come. From that moment the heliographic conversation proceeded without interruption for some time. Smith reported that from the second day after Roger's departure the enemy had been hammering away at the rock. The summit had been rendered untenable, but the mountain guns had been removed without mishap to the vaults below. The sides of the diz had been so much battered as to be practicable for assault in several places. All was well with the garrison, who were, however, almost at the end of their food.

"The poor chaps are evidently nearly starving," said Captain Barker, "and Smith says all's well!"

"What about ammunition?" asked the major.

Captain Barker flashed the question.

"They've a round or two for the guns,

and a fair stock of cartridges," he reported presently. "Naturally they've husbanded their small arms ammunition in view of the expected assault."

It turned out that Captain Smith expected the assault to take place at any moment now that the sides of the diz had been rendered scalable.

"Can you send out two Arabs?" Captain Barker asked.

"No longer possible. By day snipers too numerous; at night, enemy draws cordon round diz."

"Can you beat off first assault?"

"Yes, but would exhaust ammunition."

"Do your best; leave the rest to us."

The moon, by whose light Roger and Yusuf were to have met their fate a few nights before, was waning in the early morning when Roger, followed by five of the best scouts in the British force, crept down the narrow, tortuous, slippery gully leading into the basin. There they turned to the left, and flitted like shadows along the base of the cliff towards the conduit. It took them a full half-hour to cover the six hundred yards of rough ground between the gully and the point at which the forms

of the two sentries first became dimly visible, so careful were they of their footsteps, so patient in their use of cover.

The spot at which they halted was rather more than a hundred yards from the end of the conduit. The question now was: where was the sentry post? To discover it by scouting would be too risky: a single false step would endanger the whole enterprise. The alternative was to await the arrival of the relief. From his observations while still on the diz Roger knew the hours at which the sentries were changed during the day-time. Connecting these with the time of the relief he had noticed on the previous evening, he had arranged the movements of his party so as to reach his present position a little before the relief arrived. The journey had taken so unexpectedly long, however, that he would have been disappointed in his scheme had it not happened that the spells of night duty were shorter than those during the day. And so, about half an hour after his halt, he heard the footsteps of the approaching relief. Somewhat to his surprise, they came, not from the direction of the conduit, but from the barrage away to the south-west, and therefore across the basin. He reflected

that this was safe enough at night, when the sentries would be invisible from the diz; whereas in day-time they could hardly show themselves without running the risk of being sniped.

He heard the low challenge, the murmured exchange of signs, the words of command, and the retreating footsteps of the changed guard. Clearly, then, this was the extreme sentry post in this quarter of the basin. The party waited until all was quiet again. Then two of the men stole forward, each carrying a knife. One of them had also a knobby stone. They wormed their way as silently as snakes to within twenty or thirty paces of the nearest sentry, who was only a few yards from his fellow. Here they halted, and the man with the stone hurled it over the heads of the sentries against the hard rock behind them.

"What is that?" muttered one of them. They drew towards one another, and turned instinctively in the direction from which the sharp crack of the stone on the rock, and its subsequent clatter on the ground, had come. The two British troopers seized the moment. Moving swiftly and stealthily as panthers they sprang on the Turks almost before the sound of the falling

stone had died away. With practised deftness they whipped out the gags and ropes with which they had come provided, and the astonished sentries were flat on their backs, gazing up helplessly at the cold steely stars.

As soon as the sound of the stone striking the rock was heard, Roger led the other three men in a swift silent rush into the conduit. Leaving one man at the entrance, he hurried on, expecting presently to find another enemy post. He was not disappointed. A sentry was stationed not far away, and some fifty yards beyond him was a small camp fire.

Roger now sent one of the men back to report progress to Major Henderson, keeping the rest with him in the shelter of the conduit.

"I hope to goodness," he thought, "that a periodical inspection of the conduit is not one of the nightly duties of the beggars on guard."

While Roger and the five scouts were making their way towards the conduit, Schechter Pasha, at the headquarters of the investing force, was approaching the peroration of a long monologue addressed in



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fluent but far from correct Turkish to Colonel Rustum Bey. The Pasha was a true German. A man of any other nation is a poor creature, not to be compared with a Teuton conscious of his great mission in the world—the mission to lay down laws for the rest of humanity. The lot appointed for the Turk is to toil and sweat for the German, and be kicked for his pains.

Schechter Pasha was rubbing it in.

"You are lacking," he said with cold finality, "in most of the essential qualities of the soldier according to our good German code. You Turks have a certain courage, it is true; but there it ends. A German, trained as we alone know how to train. with the means at your disposal would have captured the rock in three days. When I returned to Bagdad I left you two battalions and four useful guns. I come back, and what do I find? Two of the guns captured, two damaged beyond repair, nearly a sixth of the effectives lost, and utter ignorance of the composition of the force opposed to you. I ask you how the guns were captured: you tell me that you don't know. I ask you who captured them: you tell me, men in khaki and wearing turbans. I ask you how they came here unperceived: you tell me again that you don't know. It is utterly disgraceful. No German would have allowed himself to be so deceived, tricked, circumvented.

"And the rock is still not taken! What you Turks want is energy, foresight, the ability to use what wits Allah has spared you. You will do no good until we Germans have taken you thoroughly in hand. It is lucky for you that I have come back. My success may cover up your delinquencies. Those few men on the rock, whom I must presume to be Indians, have now a German to deal with. The orders are to take the rock. The Russians are moving; at any moment a Cossack column may try to get into touch with the English, in which case they would move along this line. The rock must be in our hands before they can possibly arrive."

Colonel Rustum Bey stood throughout this address in sullen silence. He had his own opinion of Schechter Pasha; but that officer, as usual mistaken in judging others, fancied that he was impressed.

"Now, to work! To-night at least we have made preparations in the true German manner. You will please give the order for the men to take up their allotted posi-

tions, and to attack at the sound of the whistle half an hour before dawn. Leave one company in charge of the camp; three will form the first line of attack; two will be in reserve just behind the barrage out of reach of the enemy's guns—the enemy's, I say; how they come to be the enemy's is a matter for subsequent enquiry. You know the arrangements about the ladders: these are all worked out in my memorandum: there will be no excuse for failure. One company of my good Brandenburgers would have placed the German eagle on the rock weeks ago. Carry out my orders to the letter, and by your conduct of the operations you may retrieve the reputation which at this moment is, I say it with consideration, under a cloud."

The colonel made reply in the only terms he could muster, and went off for his final conference with the company commanders. Schechter Pasha, happy in the consciousness of having administered a rebuke and applied a stimulus with extreme German considerateness, lit a cigar and retired to his tent to await the propitious hour.

Meanwhile Major Henderson, Captain Barker, their subalterns and men had quietly stolen down the gully, and were waiting under cover at the base of the cliff. There Roger joined them.

Time stole away. The officers began to feel that the attack on the sentries had been perhaps too precipitate. If the enemy made nightly rounds the fate of the two men would be discovered. It was certain to be discovered by the next relief, which must be becoming due. Had Captain Smith been mistaken in supposing that the attack was imminent? It seemed unlikely, for the bombardment had ceased early in the day: what more probable than that the diz was to be stormed in the darkness?

Listening intently, the officers at last heard unmistakable sounds of movement, even of bustle, from the enemy's lines. Their expectations were to be justified: the assault was to be delivered. A new matter of anxiety now was whether the sentries would be changed before the attack was made. It was above all important that the enemy should not have the least suspicion that any danger lurked in the basin.

A shrill whistle broke into their silent communings. From the distance came words of command and a low rumble like the beating of surf on a shore. Major Hender-

son at once gave the order to move along the base of the cliff, and the men in single file followed Roger on the route he had previously taken. As they marched, they heard shouts, but at first no sound of firing: this was explained by the fact that the Turks had no target to aim at in the darkness. The cries drew nearer, and redoubled in volume, and when at length the crackle of rifle fire echoed round the basin, the officers concluded that Captain Smith's men were trying to beat off the assailants who were mounting on the scaling ladders.

Presently a flare was thrown down from the diz; other flares followed at short intervals, showing up the attackers to the fire of the garrison and lighting the immediate surroundings. Being far from brilliant, however, they did not carry far enough to illuminate the little force stealing along in Indian file under the cliff. Unobserved the men reached the entrance of the conduit, passed into it, and quickened their steps when they could no longer be seen from the basin.

"This would be a beastly trap," Captain Barker whispered to Roger, "if the enemy knew we were here."

They marched up the conduit, a long

string of men, halting at a point chosen by Roger, in order that arrangements might be made for deploying as rapidly as possible and rushing the sentry post which he had before located. The principal concern was to cut off fugitives, who might give the alarm to the force holding the camp. Major Henderson therefore told off a score of picked men, good runners, to move out on the flank nearest the Turks' main body before his attack was started. These should be sufficient to head off any of the enemy who escaped from the camp.

Roger felt much more nervous and overstrung than he had done on the occasion of his previous encounter with the enemy. Then, he had gone into it in a spirit of boyish adventure; now, he was conscious of the important issues at stake. Not merely the safety of the garrison of the diz depended on the success of the morning's work. What was impending was a real, even though a minor, operation of war, one that would have its part in the total result of the world struggle.

But along with his sense of the gravity of the position there was a feeling of confidence in Major Henderson. That officer had obtained a thorough grasp of the nature of the ground, so far as Roger could describe it to him. He had also knowledge and experience of war, and an imagination that enabled him to divine the intentions and dispositions of the enemy. As the event showed, the dispositions which he himself made could hardly have been

improved on.

It was a simple matter to dispose of the sentries beyond the conduit. His next concern was to rush the camp, which, as we know, had been left under guard of a single company. It was situate about a mile distant, across rough ground on the reverse slope of a hill edging the basin. The major's idea was to capture the camp, and drive the defenders up the defile leading into the basin. With the mouth of the defile in his possession, he hoped that the effect of surprise and steady shooting would be to demoralize the whole Turkish force. The one great danger was that the men in the camp would become aware of the attack before it was sufficiently developed. If they had time to rally, the game was up. They must be kept on the run.

He arranged to lead the greater part of his force at the double into the valley where the camp lay, then to turn to the right with the men in extended order and head straight for the camp. Meanwhile Captain Barker with fifty men would advance up the rough slope on the nearer side of the valley, to take the enemy in flank and prevent them from escaping up the hill-side.

Dawn had scarcely broken when the two parties started, with as little noise as was compatible with the necessary speed. In a few minutes Major Henderson's party swept into the valley, and they were already a third of the way across it when they came under fire from outposts placed some distance on their left. They completed their deployment without replying, and dashing forward in silence closed in on the camp. The defenders, warned by the shots from the outposts, were not so completely surprised as the major could have wished. They stood to arms, and showed a disposition to hold their ground stubbornly. At their first volley several of the British were hit; but still the line swept on.

Meanwhile Captain Barker, with Roger among his party, had breasted the rugged slope, and posting his men on the crest overlooking the flank of the Turks, he opened fire with rifles and his Lewis guns. The enemy, ignorant of the strength of their

assailants, and seeing themselves threatened from two quarters, began to fall back. Their movement gained impetus; and when Major Henderson pressed remorselessly on, they were seized with panic, and in a few minutes were hurrying in full retreat up the ravine towards the barrage.

It was now almost a matter of seconds. The ravine was about a quarter of a mile long. If in that space the Turks should succeed in rallying, they could hold off the attack until reinforced, and then the British would be at their mercy. Major Henderson's men exerted every ounce of energy to keep close on the heels of the fugitives. One of Captain Barker's subalterns, with a small section of those who had made the flank attack, pushed on with a Lewis gun under Roger's guidance to a spot that gave an open field of fire towards the barrage. On arriving there, they found that it was in full view of the howitzer crew, besides the enemy's reserve which Schechter Pasha had posted behind the barrage. Quick as thought, the lieutenant placed the Lewis gun under cover of a rock, and ordered his men to extend on both sides, and open fire on the two companies crowded in the narrow defile, and now being joined by the fleetest runners among the fugitives from the camp. The enemy opened a scattered fire in return. but they had not seen the Lewis gun, nor could they now see the men steadily aiming at them from cover: they knew only the direction of the attack. Moreover, every moment they were joined by panic-stricken fugitives, with alarming news of an overwhelming force pouring upon them from an unexpected quarter. Uncertainty, indecision and poor discipline had the inevitable result. Some of the Turks sought shelter from the terrible fire of the Lewis gun by rushing to the basin side of the barrage. Others followed like sheep. And when Major Henderson's body pushed up the top of the ravine, and the rest of Captain Barker's men appeared on the ridge of the slope, the panic spread through the whole of the enemy's reserve, and they made a wild stampede towards the basin.

At this moment Captain Smith showed that he was on the alert. While some of his men were still engaged in desperately stemming the assault of the Turks swarming up the diz, he got his guns into position on the platform and opened fire on the disorderly rout. This proved to be the finishing stroke. The fugitives from the

camp, inextricably mixed up with the reserves, rushed madly along the basin towards the defile. The men assailing the diz, now aware that something untoward was happening behind them, wavered, and fell back, their withdrawal hastened by the troopers above, who advanced boldly to the edge of the platform and, now reckless of ammunition, poured a galling fire upon them.

A large part of the area of the basin was now filled with a confused crowd of men, uttering frenzied shouts, not knowing whither to turn, heedless of their officers. and of Schechter Pasha, who rode down from the spot at which he had been watching the assault and made vain efforts to reduce them to order. A few of the bolder spirits, indeed, made an effort to rally round him, but a shell from the howitzer, which Major Henderson had captured on the way up, caused them to break and flee in all directions. Galled by the incessant rifle fire from the men well posted at the barrage, there was no more fight in them. With one consent the frantic mob rushed into the defile, through which, yelling, cursing, impeding each other, the men urged their tempestuous way. Captain Smith used the last of his ammunition in speeding their

THE BATTLE FOR THE DIZ 277

flight, and another shell from the howitzer plunged among them as a parting salute.

Schechter Pasha, to do him justice, roared himself hoarse in trying to stay the panic, and remained on the scene of action until he saw that the attempt was hopeless. Then ill-luck befell him. A shot killed his horse, and he was pinned to the ground beneath the fallen animal. It was some minutes before he was released by one of the victorious Englishmen. And then Roger felt that he was doubly avenged for the unceremonious commandeering of his horse in Bagdad weeks before, for he saw the German officer hauled in a sling to the platform of the diz.

CONCLUSION

It has now been related how Roger Burnet went through the enemy's lines, to take his part in the world war. What that part was cannot be told here. Captain Smith had teased him with the prospect of spending several months in training at a school of cadets, of undergoing an examination, and then receiving a commission "on probation." That, however, was not Roger's fate. His knowledge of the native languages induced the general to retain him in Mesopotamia, though if he had followed his inclination he would have hurried to France and thrown himself with all the ardour and enthusiasm of his temperament into the great struggle there.

Asker's diz remained in the possession of the British. The urgent call for men elsewhere prevented the Turks from making any further attempts to capture it, and the British general took immediate steps to fortify it and stock it with provisions. It was garrisoned by a half battalion of infantry, the Bengal Lancers, after recovering their horses from the dell in which they had become fat and lengthened their tails, returning to the lines below Kut.

The dervish Hezar, or Alfred Sanderson as he was known to a few, continued his work in the secret service. One day he brought Roger a letter from Firouz Ali, the barber of Bagdad. "Know, Aga, that all goes well. The Grand Sherif of Mecca has risen against the tyranny of the Padishah, and by the help of Allah great good will spring out of these present evils. Would that your honoured father had lived to see the day when the desire of his heart shall be fulfilled. Upon you be blessing and peace!"

THE END



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